

[*The Legacy of the Second World War*, John Lukacs, Yale University Press, 208 pages]

World War Without End

By John Willson

JOHN LUKACS SAYS in the introduction to his remarkable book *A Thread of Years*, referring to a friend of a friend, “he writes, not for a living, not for reputation, but because he can’t help it.” Lukacs responds in his own voice, “Not quite—but I can’t help writing this.”

He’s chosen an interesting title for his latest book, *The Legacy of the Second World War*, implying, as in his *Confessions of an Original Sinner* and *Last Rites*, that there is something to hand on to the next generation. “Legacy” is from the Latin *legare*, “to bequeath,” and although Lukacs’s title says that it is the Good War doing the bequeathing, he is too.

Reading a book by John Lukacs is always an adventure. On the one hand, he assumes that you have read all the others; on the other hand, he repeats the substance of the others so that you won’t forget and adds something sufficiently provocative to draw you to the next one—or perhaps to cause you to throw this one against the wall a few times. We see here familiar Lukacs themes: nationalism, not ideology, was the major force driving countries and conflicts in the 20th century; the two great wars were triangular contests, especially the second, a “gigantic global struggle” between Western parliamentary democracy, Communism, and National Socialism; the great leaders directing the struggles, Churchill and Roosevelt, Hitler and Stalin, are best understood as nationalist statesmen (with Churchill being the greatest and Hitler the most extraordinary); an emphasis on the will and character of Great Men (“during the Second World War a few men ... governed the history of the world”); and the elusive, if

seductive, idea of national character.

Stephen Tonsor said in response, “Sometimes the argument verges on the clever but absurd. To call Hitler a ‘statesman’ is akin to calling Genghis Khan a statesman and comparing him to Augustus or Charlemagne.” Most of the widely respected historians of World War II—I think here of the great Gerhard Weinberg—have come to their conclusions about the ideologue Hitler based upon extensive archival research, of which Lukacs is generally contemptuous (the converse of the utter contempt that Weinberg has for non-archival historians). How we approach the study and understanding of history is at the heart of John Lukacs’s legacy and should be the main subject of any discussion of his books.

The legacy of World War II on one level is straightforward. World War I begat World War II, which begat the Cold War. World War II completed the destruction of old-fashioned colonial empires. Eventually, the Western parliamentary democracies won, although not unambiguously.

World War II (and now we get more Lukacsian) more or less completed the end of the long Modern Age. Lee Congdon, writing a wonderful appreciation of Lukacs’s work, says that his “love for the civilization that evolved during the some 500 years of the Modern, European, Bourgeois Age is manifest in all of his work,” along with his “conviction that bourgeois civilization was dedicated to the cultivation of the interior life, one distinguished by a sense of privacy, a love of disciplined liberty, a recognition that truth is more important than justice, and a bias in favor of permanent possessions and residence.” If World War II brought this age to an end, it follows that it also revived “barbarism.” Paul Johnson argues that the almost universal acceptance of relativism was responsible for what Lukacs calls barbarism, but under either name the war introduced a new age of horror, the morally problematic postwar “trials” to the contrary notwithstanding.

Lukacs’s assertions about some aspects of the war—and John Lukacs is

not afraid to assert—have struck many observers as eccentric, and most of them appear in this volume to one extent or another. To wit: Hitler was an extreme nationalist rather than a racist (may he not have been both?); he did not want a world war; he was “the most extraordinary figure in the history of the twentieth century”; national socialism was always much more popular than communism; if a Republican (he names Hoover and Taft) had been president in 1940, Hitler would have won the war; American “obsession” with anticommunism injured its politics, perhaps permanently, and contributed to the growth of a thuggish kind of nationalist democratic populism. On this last point, Lukacs doesn’t say it, but he may well believe that the new dark age will be characterized by competing national socialisms. He really disliked Joe McCarthy, and in another place declares Whittaker Chambers “wrong, wrong, wrong!” that the great challenge to the West was the religion of communism, “Ye shall be as gods.”

His strong opinions aside, John Lukacs’s great contribution to the study of World War II, and to the study of history in general, is the central insight of his greatest book, *Historical Consciousness*. I’m paraphrasing here, but he says that if one has a proper understanding of human nature, one does not need a philosophy of history. He rejects all forms of determinism, and thus all forms of ideology. “History and the novel have certain things in common,” he writes in *A Thread of Years*. “History has not yet had its Dante or its Shakespeare. That will come one day,” though not perhaps from Lukacs’s pen.

He does not bow down to the standards of the American Historical Association, and he has never tried to clone himself through graduate-student sycophants; in an important sense he is anti-professional. He admires the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and the now almost forgotten Carlton J.H. Hayes, who pioneered the study of nationalism and sold more books than any other historian of the 20th century.

Just as Hayes could borrow from the social sciences for insights into the psychology of nationalism and *A Generation of Materialism* because his Catholic faith kept him grounded in reality, so Lukacs can take science seriously. (He is one of the very few historians who understands quantum physics.) What makes Lukacs an “original sinner” also makes him an original historian who knows that more often than not, the imagination trumps the archives. And behind his historical consciousness lies a teacher, a real teacher of undergraduates. So for many reasons, we must take his assertions seriously.

The analysis that will most interest readers of this book is in the last chapter, “The Second World War and the Origins of the Cold War.” He hopes that “at least some of his readers will share his sense of indignation about the ideological—that is, Communism-obsessed—explanation of the cold war and even of the Second World War [note what is capitalized and what is not]. For those who think and say and write that the history of the twentieth century was governed by the epic struggle of Democracy (or Freedom) against Communism imply that the Second World War was but a secondary chapter. . . . But the opposite is true.” The century, he says, was defined by the two world wars: “The Russian Revolutions of 1917 were a consequence of the First World War, the cold war of the Second.”

Thus the question: was the Cold War avoidable? Lukacs believes that if everyone had properly understood each other, it probably was, at least by the time Stalin died in 1953. I can’t help thinking of Paul Newman’s line in “Cool Hand Luke,” just before they blew his head off: “What we got here is a failure to communicate.” Lukacs thinks that there is enough evidence that Stalin was a nationalist statesman, that he and FDR respected each other, that there was “a discrepancy between Russia’s foreign policy and its internal regime,” and that Churchill was such a hardheaded realist, that if cooler American heads had prevailed the Cold War could have warmed

a significant amount by about 1956. He has no illusions about Stalin’s behavior in Eastern Europe, nor about the brutality of the Soviet regime. He simply believes that Soviet domestic and foreign policy could have operated in direct contradiction to each other, an assertion that I have not found to be true in most of human history. Foreign policy always reflects domestic policy.

Curiously, Lukacs would probably agree with that dictum in the case of the United States. “Wilson Is Overtaking Lenin” is an old theme of his, meaning that democratic progressivism in American foreign policy has dragged us into endless adventures that are more ideological than prudent (although he does not think that World War II was one of them). That this country has been in shooting wars almost 70 percent of my three-score years and ten and in very dangerous, confrontational Cold War the other 30 percent seems to give Lukacs’s point some weight. Quite a record for a peace-loving democracy, even as compared with the evil empire. Lukacs’s own anticommunism, which predated much of America’s “popular obsession with the evils of Communism,” was where he originally connected with the keen analysis of Soviet behavior voiced by George Kennan. They both thought that the United States reacted too late and too ideologically and too militarily to what was a problem much more nuanced than our post-World War II leaders understood.

On this last point it is hard to disagree with Lukacs (and Kennan). NSC-68 and all its revisions and additions up until the present day, while producing policies that have been mostly popular (even Vietnam was a popular war for most of the years we were there), are shallow ideological documents that contradict the realities of human nature about which Lukacs is so good at reminding us. Relations among nations, after all, are not much different from how we deal with our next-door neighbors. Lukacs is at his best when forcing us, his readers, to make distinctions and to read into our historical conscious-

ness something other than our favorite prejudices. On the other hand, is it incompatible with the record or the imagination to believe that both Whitaker Chambers and George Kennan could be right? That communism was the great spiritual challenge of the 20th century, and that we should have dealt with it without necessarily confusing it with the Soviet Union?

He thinks that America is turning West and South again, away from Europe. World War II brought Europe and the U.S. back together, but the end of the age, Lukacs thinks, might separate us again. Not a bad idea, if we don’t go South and West with the same crusading spirit that we have recently gone (Middle) East. ■

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[*Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, Terry Teachout, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 475 pages]

King Louis and All That Jazz

By Scott Galupo

THE EXISTENCE OF MOZART was, to Saul Bellow, an affront to philosophical materialism. “At the heart of my confession, therefore, is the hunch that with beings such as Mozart we are forced to speculate about transcendence, and this makes us very uncomfortable,” Bellow wrote, “since ideas of transcendence are associated with crankiness or fadism—even downright instability and mental feebleness.”

In his new biography *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, Terry Teachout evinces no such discomfort when he declares, more pithily, that his subject “was not just a man but a miracle.”

Such high praise is common to any discussion of jazz’s pioneering—really, its first—improvisational soloist. Murray Horwitz, co-author of the book to the musical *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, called the cadenza with which Armstrong opens 1928’s “West End Blues” “maybe the most important 15 seconds in all of American music.” Clive James—perhaps the only living English-language critic who surpasses Teachout in his ability to write authoritatively across the humanities—credits Armstrong with “having done ... as much as anyone since Lincoln to change the history of the United States.”

So here we have nothing less than a history-altering, miraculous life that began in a Big Easy vice district and saw explosive changes in art and American society as a whole. All that’s missing is a memorial and education center on the National Mall.

But then, if you take the consensus of

jazz scholarship at its word, Armstrong’s was a life that, academically speaking, needn’t have continued much past 1928, the terminus of his Chicago period and his seminal work with the Hot Five and Hot Seven bands. World renown and hit records may have followed—indeed stretching into the rock era with 1964’s smash “Hello, Dolly!”—but the meteoric innovation fizzled with the rise of swing and its commercial big bands.

Teachout’s rebuttal is hidden in plain view, right there in that one-word jab of a title—*Pops*. (Armstrong informally referred to every guy as “Pops” and so earned the nickname himself. The gaping mouth inspired others like “Dipper” and “Satchmo”—the latter, Teachout surmises, originally a British-inflected abbreviation of “Satchelmouth.”)

By implication, Teachout asks the word to bear more weight. He writes, “For jazz to reach its fullest expressive potential, as well as a truly popular audience, it would first need to find embodiment not in a composer, however gifted, but in a soloist of genius with a personality to match, a charismatic individual capable of meeting the untutored listener halfway.”

Armstrong, in a word, made jazz popular.

And he did so, Teachout maintains, by dint of the broadly appealing persona for which his admirer-detractors gave him grief. “[I]t was in 1936, not before, that he began turning up in the mainstream press on a more or less regular basis, and it was his films and radio appearances, not his public performances, that put him there.” Teachout calls Armstrong “a middlebrow”—and does so with his nose pointed straight ahead.

With an absurdly foreshortened frame of historical reference, the Rev. Al Sharpton said in the wake of that other King of Pop’s death, “Michael Jackson made culture accept a person of color, way before Tiger Woods, way before Oprah Winfrey, way before Barack Obama. Michael did with music what they later did in sports, and in politics, and in television.”

Come again?

Decades before *Thriller*, Louis Armstrong was co-starring and crooning with Bing Crosby and, in 1949, made the cover of *Time*, a recognition that, Teachout hastens to remind the reader, “carried far more weight in the forties than it does today.”

Yet by the Eisenhower years, the black intelligentsia, even fellow jazzers, were openly scorning Armstrong. A character in James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” refers to Armstrong’s music as “old-time, down home crap.” Dizzy Gillespie called him a “plantation character.” Coleman Hawkins lamented that he was “playing just like he did when he was 20 years old; he isn’t going any place musically.” Billie Holiday stuck up for him—with the backside of her hand: “God bless Louis Armstrong! He Toms from the heart.”

The widemouthed grin, the handkerchief, the mugging, and all the other elements of his antic onstage presence—these had become all but unbearable to the wisened-up likes of Miles Davis, who while admiring the musical accomplishments of his forebears nonetheless derided both Armstrong and Gillespie for “acting the clown.” But Teachout notes that Davis could safely lob such grenades from a position of relative comfort; Armstrong and his generation had done jazz’s heavy lifting, turning mongrel street music into respectable art.

Pops is no populist apologia, however. Teachout doesn’t wholly defend the scattershot mid-period—there was the big band, Broadway, even a one-off recording with country singer Jimmie Rodgers (“Blue Yodel #9”)—so much as notice how Armstrong’s trumpet unfailingly shone through its often mediocre surroundings.

At times, Teachout is given to a rather importunate sort of pleading. For instance, “No matter what he was given to record, he gave his best in return, and his alchemic ability to turn dross into gold was undiminished.” And “These pop sides are not to be sneered at—not