

New angle on Hitler's Russia blunder

June 1941: Hitler and Stalin, Yale University Press, 192 pages, \$25.

REVIEW

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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

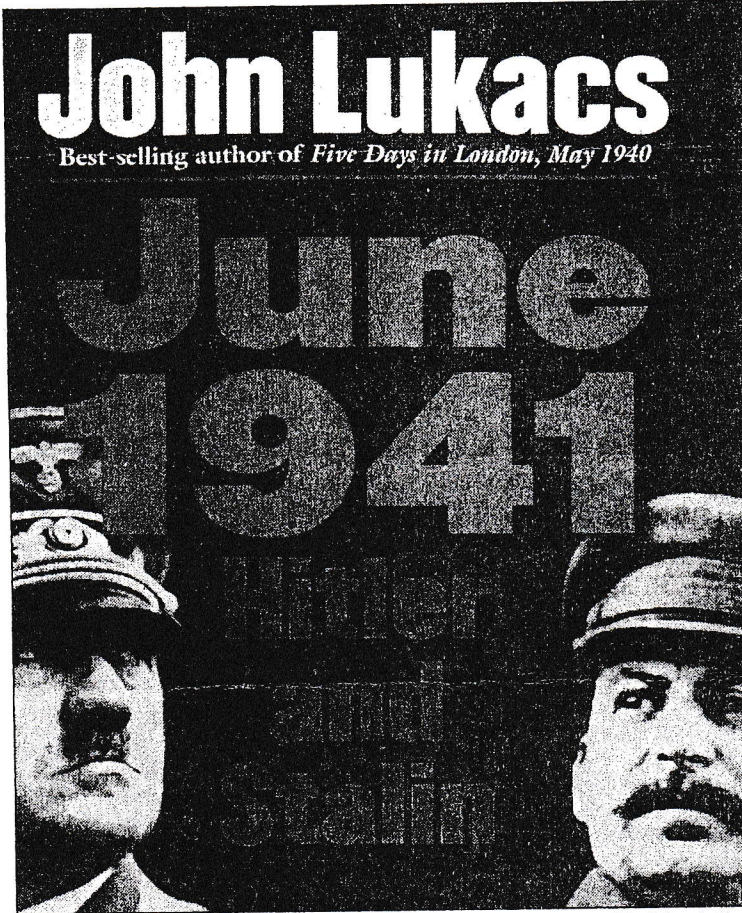
John Lukacs is without question one of the greatest historians of our time. Now in his 80s, he manifests the economy of his years through the writing of succinct works that are essentially distillations of thought unburdened by the ponderous weight of the great and more youthful tome. In these, the reader is given the benefit of a lifetime of concentrated reflection without the dross of detail that quickly passes from the mind and, in the end, serves no real purpose other than to obscure the main points.

Lukacs' primary interest remains the 20th century that he convincingly insists is the "transitional" phase of the European or Modern Age (roughly 1500-2000), from its zenith in the 19th, to the 21st that marks its end and the beginning of whatever it is we are in now. (It is apparent that the ages in the triune of Ancient, Medieval and Modern have grown progressively shorter — that history is accelerating.)

In this vein, Lukacs has produced a series of brilliant books (required reading for anyone interested in the Second World War), set jewel-like in a great crown of work: *The Duel; The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age; The Hitler of History; Five Days in London; Churchill: Visionary, Statesman, Historian* and now *June 1941, Hitler and Stalin*. In these, Lukacs focuses on what dramatists sometimes call "plot points" — the key moments in which the action spins in a new and important direction, such as Winston Churchill's "duel" with Adolf Hitler in May of '40 and, in this latest book, Hitler's "duel" with Joseph Stalin in June of '41.

OPERATION BARBAROSSA

Lukacs addresses the great question of that tragic year. Why? Why — with England near defeat, America neutral and Russia an ally — did Hitler attack his "friend" Stalin? Many of Hitler's generals advocated a "Mediterranean" strategy, pressuring England via air and sea in the North while taking Suez in the South, thereby severing the Empire. Instead, Hitler attacked Russia on June 22, 1941, with Operation Barbarossa, and in less than six months the screw had turned against him. Contrary to conventional thinking that plots the war's turning points — east and west — at Midway and Stalingrad, Lukacs compresses them into the 48 hours of Dec. 7-8, 1941 — Pearl Harbor and Moscow. In these few hours, he contends, the contest was converted from a European one that Hitler might have won to a world war that he had no hope



Why did Hitler take such a gamble? In *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin*, Lukacs attempts to answer this question. After dismissing the usual reasons advanced, such as pre-emptive war and living space, Lukacs says Hitler's main concern "was not Russia; it was England." Then he goes on to quote Hitler as saying:

England's hope is Russia and America. If hope on Russia is eliminated, America is also eliminated ... Russia [is] the factor on which England is mainly betting. Should Russia, however, be smashed, then England's last hope is extinguished ... Russia must be disposed of. Spring 1941. The quicker we smash Russia, the better.

In a word, Hitler, like Napoleon, attacked Russia with an army because he had no navy with which to attack England.

There were multiple factors, but Lukacs is saying the desire to defeat the British was paramount. Of course, one can accept Lukacs' conclusions while remaining puzzled by Hitler's thinking. And while Hitler is frequent-

a difference between their respective positions in 1812 and 1941. Napoleon had fewer choices. His Mediterranean strategy had already failed — Nelson had seen to that — and his blockade of English goods was a bust. Yet for Hitler the Southern option was quite viable with far less risk and a much greater chance of success than attacking Russia. (As it was, through the brilliance of Rommel, Hitler very nearly succeeded in taking Suez in any case. This alone speaks of the weakness of the British in North Africa. In fact, according to Lukacs, "had Hitler willed it," he "could perhaps have arrived at the gates of India.")

However, one gets the impression, although Lukacs does not quite say so, that Hitler believed war with Russia was inevitable. That is, while he had no fear of an imminent attack, Hitler must have felt there was simply not room enough in Europe for two titanic national-socialist states sharing a common frontier to live in peace. So strike quickly and hard, knock out Russia while one still had the chance, and England would naturally follow.

But, too, there were the Jews. One should not underestimate, in this reviewer's opinion, the strength of this

in Hitler. Indeed, the Holocaust looms as a dark, brooding, irrational presence in all of Hitler's plans. He considered the Jews as the "key to history" (Hitler's words, reflecting, paradoxically, a kind of subconscious admiration), and in early 1941, Hitler explained that Barbarossa would be an "ideological war of extermination," that "Jewish-Bolshevism" was the target — two enemies in one. In this context Barbarossa indeed seems inevitable. And recalling that more than half of European Jewry was in the East and not in North Africa, one could argue — propelling Hitler into the Russian abyss as it did — that it was precisely this mania of murdering the Jews that tipped the balance eastward, costing Hitler the war.

THE BLOODIEST BATTLE

Yet far from the short campaign that Hitler had hoped for, Barbarossa became the bloodiest battle in human history. In June 1941, 6 million soldiers fought along a thousand-mile front. By 1943, the total number engaged remained constant at 11 million. Leading up to the battle for Moscow in December 1941, the Red Army had lost 4½ million men, and the Germans nearly a million. In a single campaign (the defense of Kiev in '41), Russia suffered more killed than the United States did in the entire war. Astoundingly, as Catherine Merridale states in her recent and excellent *Ivan's War*, "In all, the Red Army was destroyed and renewed at least twice in the course of the war." Between '39 and '45 Stalin mobilized 35 million soldiers. His country's losses were 27 million dead, of which about 10 million wore uniforms. (Russian casualties alone exceed both sides in the first world war.) Germany lost 4 million, and by the time the allies had opened the "Second Front" at Normandy, the Wehrmacht was on the ropes.

Lukacs, in his fascinating, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*, states:

In 1941, facing almost the entirety of the greatest German war machine in the history of the world, which reached the outskirts of Moscow and Leningrad, the Russian people fought on. Their resistance was unpredictable and unexplainable.

Plagued by misgivings on the eve of Barbarossa, Hitler, according to Lukacs, stated, "The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room. One never knows what is hidden in the darkness."

What Hitler found waiting was indeed a surprise — an indomitable spirit — first in Churchill, then in the Russians. In this Hitler encountered something he never dreamed possible — a will greater than his own.

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