

Liebe Hitler

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The Hitler of History, by John Lukacs,
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997. xiv
+ 279 pp.

IT WAS THE LATE SUMMER of 1935 or 1936. My father drove us in to St. Louis to the home of my great aunt, Theressa Hildebrand, for an early September get-together of the Blazer family. My great uncles, much married and a source of employment to the Catholic marriage courts, had, with their current wives, been in Germany during the summer, the Germany of Adolf Hitler. The night was hot, as only St. Louis can be hot, and there was the lurking fear of infection from the "sleeping sickness" which was sweeping the city and its environs.

As the electric fans hummed and roared, heavy "refreshments" were served and the children, fainting away from boredom, the conversation now turned from family to the question of National Socialist Germany, and as one of my great aunts by marriage so quaintly put it, "*liebe* Hitler." The discussion which ensued was as hot as the evening and, as I recall, was continued by my mother and father on the long drive home at the end of that evening. Such discussions were

not unusual in intensely Catholic German families in the mid-1930s. What was one to make of the tremendous upheaval in Germany and the extraordinary figure of Adolf Hitler?

The discussion did not end on that hot summer evening but has continued down to the present day with increasing sophistication and vehemence as John Lukacs demonstrates in his splendid study, *The Hitler of History*.

Historical perspective is not the same as the linear perspective of the representational artist. For the historian some objects grow in size and importance as we move from and beyond them in time. Those of us who were caught up in the agonies of the 1930s and fought in Hitler's war sensed that our lives had been shaped in important ways by that terrible Austrian but we did not comprehend his world historical importance, his capacity for evil, or his surprising genius. It is only the passage of time, as Professor Lukacs demonstrates, that enables us to evaluate Hitler's role and character with some accuracy, though even now there are many disputed points and cloudy areas in this historical landscape.

In the mid-1930s it was easy enough to dismiss Hitler as an added Austrian, a "paper hanger" who could not succeed at a proper bourgeois occupation, a

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"*Tapatenfresser*" who fell on the floor and chewed the carpet when his political will was crossed. Only gradually and well after more than half the world lay in ruins did a new historical portrait come into existence. Lukacs, with argumentative and analytical pointilism, corrects old errors and underlines new evidence. Though Lukacs's work is historiographical rather than biographical a new portrait of Hitler emerges. It too, however, has its defects.

That Hitler was a figure of great historical magnitude was only gradually realized. In 1955, a full decade after the war, Hugh Trevor-Roper, in *The New York Times Magazine* of April 24, 1955, wrote in a significant quote not offered by Lukacs:

Hitler was a unique figure in history. It is no good dismissing him as a mere product of blind social forces. Never in history before has one man, from nothing, out of total defeat, created first a revolution, then a military empire, and controlled them both to the end. Caesar and Napoleon cashed in on revolutions others had made; Lenin planned a revolution but never an empire; but Hitler, in character the meanest of all revolutionary tyrants, did both plan and achieve both his revolution and his empire.

At the outset it must be asserted that this reevaluation of Hitler is not a movement from revulsion and condemnation to admiration. It is, of course, debatable that Hitler was a genius, that he was a military strategist on a par with Alexander and Napoleon, that he was a statesman as great as or greater than Bismarck, that he was a social reformer who recast an inadequate social order. It is, however, legitimate to make a case for each of the assumptions. Reevaluation does not mean rehabilitation. Reevaluation is the ordinary work of the historian as is very evident in American historians' reevaluation of Thomas Jefferson.

Nor should it surprise us that after shifting through the work of every major

historian of Hitler and the Third Reich with the exception of Gerhard Weinberg, Lukacs should find positive elements in the polity Hitler created. Even a blind goose picks up a few grains of corn and Hitler was far from being a blind goose. Nonetheless, Lukacs seems to be puzzled by the positive elements in Hitler's nature and polity.

This puzzlement manifests itself in Lukacs's assertion that his book is a movement away from the demonization to the historization of Hitler. Hitler, Lukacs asserts, "was not a demonic." This assertion indicates a lack of knowledge as to the nature of the demonic and of the demonic dimensions of Hitler's personality.

Perhaps it would be well to rehearse just what over the millennia Westerners have understood when they have spoken of the demonic. The usage first appears in Homer. For the Greeks it comes to mean increasingly *mana*, or supernatural power located in and radiated out from a male personality. Martin Nilsson in his study *Grekisk Religiositet*, ascribes this to the fact that the Greeks could not conceive of a disembodied spirit or power. It was originally thought of as fate, either good or evil, and so a man's fate was his overriding *daimon*. Thus from the outset the *daimon* was thought of as both good or evil in character. The Judaeo-Christian assimilation of the idea was wholly in terms of an evil spirit which animated the pagan Gods and took possession of unfortunate men and women.

The demonic became in the middle of the eighteenth century, and with the advent of Romanticism, a favorite explanation of creativity and political leadership. In Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, Goethe opines on March 2, 1831:

"The demonic is that which cannot be explained by Reason or Understanding; it lies not in my nature but I am subject to it.

"Napoleon," said I, [Eckermann], "seems to have been of the demonic sort."

"He was so, thoroughly and in the highest degree, so that scarce anyone is to be compared with him...."

"Is not the Demonic," said I, [Eckermann], "perceptible in events also?"

"Particularly, and indeed in all that we cannot explain by Reason and Understanding. It manifests itself in the most varied manner throughout nature—in the invisible as in the visible. Many creatures are of a purely demonic kind; in many, parts of it are effective."

"Has not Mephistopheles," said I, [Eckermann], "demonic traits, too?"

"No, Mephistopheles is much too negative a being. The Demonic manifests itself as a thoroughly active power...."

One might produce many more citations on the subject of the demonic from Goethe—and no German can believe Goethe to have been wholly wrong. Lukacs's contention that Hitler was not demonic because not all of his actions were negative and Mephistophelean is already in Goethe's conception. Anyone who witnessed Hitler's performance at the Nuremberg Party Days or watched his impact on small groups knows that his power reached beyond the explicable effect of oratory or the persuasiveness of personal charm. It may be that the Weberian demystification of History, its *Entzauberung*, has gone entirely too far in historical science and that the inexplicable can only be explained in terms of the inexplicable.

Lukacs's arguments are those of a sophisticated and informed historian. Often these arguments bear the signs of discrimination and analytical selectivity, but nearly as often they move beyond the full implications of the evidence to supposition and conjecture.

Lukacs's treatment of "the final solution" and the Holocaust is the outstand-

ing example of this inability to read all the evidence. It is simply wrong to assert that "the final solution" was embarked upon only after the invasion of the Soviet Union and Hitler's declaration of war against the United States. The Holocaust was implicit in Hitler's racial theories from the outset. The fact is that German public opinion could not be moved all at once to a program so morally reprehensible. Nonetheless the vans which drove from institution to institution and gassed the helpless and the mentally impaired were in operation long before the "final solution" and were practice exercises in the campaign of racial cleansing. The massive programs of sterilization of the racially unfit and eventually the euthanasia of the aged and the chronically ill long antedated the Holocaust. Already in 1941 Heidemarie Hatheyer starred in a film attempting to popularize euthanasia. As long ago as 1953 Gerald Reitlinger, in his study *The Final Solution*, saw this film as preparation for what was to come.

Can any believe, as Lukacs seems to believe, that the "final solution" was a simple act of revenge and not the culmination of racial theories and racial policies which were the grand objective of Hitler's politics? It is true, as Lukacs asserts, that Hitler had little in common with the metaphysical racists, the collection of kooks who traveled in the company of Mathilda von Ludendorf. It is also true that Hitler was himself hardly an example of the Aryan human ideal. As the witticism went in the mid-thirties, an Aryan is someone blond as Hitler, fleet of foot as Dr. Goebbels, and slim as Goering. Nonetheless Lebensborn was in place by 1935 to preserve racially healthy types born out of wedlock and, once the war was in progress, to kidnap children in the East who exhibited Aryan racial characteristics and raise them as National Socialists. The Nuremberg Laws were soon in place and The Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germanism was

active after October 7, 1939, resettling Germans in the newly conquered lands of the East. The object of National Socialist policy from the outset was the subjugation and the elimination of racial types or misfits who did not accommodate themselves to the Aryan ideal. Do we need to suppose that the "final solution" was an afterthought, an idea which popped into Hitler's mind on the way to the Forum? Such an explanation is simply in contradiction to the weight of the evidence.

Similarly, to argue as the Communist Left long ago argued with respect to the Stalin regime, that National Socialism was not totalitarian in intention and practice, is a form of historical self-deception. Italian Fascism and Hannah Arendt are not the only sources, as Lukacs seems to think, of totalitarian theory. Arendt was not alone in exploring the subject of Nazi totalitarianism. More distinguished and better known were political scientists such as Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Raymond Aron. However, had they never written a line on the subject of totalitarianism the historical evidence from National Socialist Germany blueprints all the characteristics of totalitarian rule.

From the outset the Nazis aimed at total control. That such control could be achieved only gradually and that it was never complete goes without saying. Still, the processes the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung* (transformation or accommodation), by which organizations and institutions were to be brought under Nazi control and reoriented to Nazi doctrine, are telling examples of National Socialist intentions. The youth movement is an exemplary case, but the press, labor unions, the representational arts, music, literature, the law and agriculture, to say nothing of banking, are all stunning examples of what the Nazis had in mind.

The frequent effort to present Hitler in a benign mood, a sort of "Hitler in the

Spring," leads one to suspect a defective sense of the power of evil and the embodiment of evil in the personalities of particular men and women. It strikes me as odd that, at the end of the twentieth century, anyone would be forced to argue that historical science, as it is now practiced, is incapable of dealing with evil as an overwhelming force in human history. Yet Lukacs's book pushes us in that direction. If history teaches us anything it is that, as Kant argued in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, there is such a thing as radical evil. This elementary datum of human experience is not to be papered over by the partial insights of "historical" supposition. Moreover, all the evidence points to the fact that Hitler and his minions knew that what they were doing was evil. They knew it as well as Cain knew that fratricide was evil. Lord Acton quoted the Duke de Broglie, "Beware of too much explaining, lest we end by too much excusing." In his *Lectures on the French Revolution*, Acton also noted: "The strong man with the dagger is followed by the weaker man with the sponge." First, it is the criminal who slays, then it is the sophist who defends the slayer. Of course Lukacs cannot be charged with sophistry though his arguments tend to be ingenious.

What, then, are we to make of this rather unusual historical essay? Certainly this latest Lukacs book is thorough and fascinating. There is no effort made to mitigate Hitler's crimes or to justify the enormously ugly historical past. Still, the argument seems, from time to time, to veer in that direction. This is so much the case that Lukacs feels called upon to issue a caveat again and again after many of his more daring efforts of historical reevaluation.

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. There is a

difference between success and principled action. It is also true that Hitler was operating in a world exhausted by war, economic collapse, ideologically divided and politically decadent. "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king."

For some years a school of scholars of American history interpreted the populist movement of a century ago in America as a native American variety of Fascism. Lukacs inverts the argument by making Hitler a populist. By this feat of verbal prestidigitation have we gained anything in understanding? Surely, contemporaries of Hitler would have been astonished to discover that he was not a Fascist.

That Hitler was not a conservative but rather a radical social reformer is not generally recognized. No doubt the "Conservative" Hitler was both a National Socialist construction for partisan political purpose and a Marxist ideological construction resulting from the inability of Marxists to make distinctions between right-wing political movements. Yes, Hitler believed in and made a social revolution, though whether the social transformation National Socialism produced was beneficial is a matter of lively debate.

In the representational arts and in architecture Lukacs seems to confuse the Nazi higher *Kitsch* with the aesthetically praiseworthy. The designs for the Berlin of the future, over which Hitler and Speer labored down to the last days of the war, can only be described as grotesquely monumental. In representational art, *gesunde Erotik* (healthy eroticism) and the school of "the Master of the pubic hair" were not restoration and innovation but a slick decadence.

The Hitler of History is an intelligent and, in many instances, a profound book, but one to be read with care and discernment lest it come to illustrate once more that a little learning is a dangerous thing.

Conservative Thought and Public Policy

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Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to the Present, edited by

Jerry Z. Muller, *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 450 pp.*

AT PRESENT THERE ARE at least four substantial collections of conservative writing readily available: Buckley and Kesler's *Keeping the Tablets* (1988) (earlier published, with a slightly different set of selections, as *Have You Ever Seen a Dream Walking?* [1970]); Russell Kirk's *Portable Conservative Reader* (1984); George A. Panichas's *Modern Age: The First Twenty-Five Years* (1988); and most recently Roger Scruton's *Conservative Texts* (1991). Such collections are valuable because they can illustrate classic examples of conservative thought and also demonstrate the application of conservative principles to a number of contexts. The weakness of such collections is the reverse of their strength. Unlike the universalist thrust of liberalism, conservatism has remained stubbornly and consistently local in its concerns and arguments, and any compendium purporting to set forth conservative principles must by necessity flatten areas that to conservatives are highly nuanced. Indeed, most conservative collections

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