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80 Days That Saved the World

By Peter Stansky; Peter Stansky teaches modern British history at Stanford University

THE DUEL 10 May-31 July 1940: The Eighty-Day Struggle Between Churchill and Hitler. By John Lukacs. 258 pp. New York: Ticknor & Fields. \$19.95.

The literature about Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler is so immense one might have thought that this short book about 80 days in 1940, appearing slightly more than 50 years after the events it describes, would not be particularly needed or illuminating. Nothing could be farther from the truth. With elegance and panache -- although at a few rare moments the choice of words is slightly fantastical -- John Lukacs has told the story of a duel between these two great figures. It encompasses what he calls -- at the moment of Dunkirk in May -- "the greatest crisis in nine centuries of English history." At first one feels that the concept of a duel might appear a little imposed upon the past -- taking away from those broader historical categories of economic, diplomatic, military and political factors in World War II. But "The Duel" manages to be convincing in its argument that the particular decisions and personalities of Churchill and Hitler determined the future of our world.

Mr. Lukacs, the author of 17 books, among them "A History of the Cold War" and "The Last European War, 1939-1941," is very taken with coincidences, for which he finds a picturesque but somewhat cloudy phrase from G. K. Chesterton: "spiritual pun." He begins with a coincidence on May 10, 1940, the day that Churchill became Prime Minister and Hitler went to Euskirchen, a German town near the Belgian border, and launched his easy conquest of virtually all of continental Western Europe. Mr. Lukacs makes clear the rather uncertain position that Churchill occupied at the beginning of his time as prime minister, not only in terms of the country's imperiled existence but also in the comparatively weak support he received from his fellow politicians, most of whom had mistrusted him for years. Consistent with his commitment to magnanimity, Churchill, although determined to lead and feeling much more assured now that he was in a position to do so, was strikingly generous in his loyalty to his discredited predecessor, Neville Chamberlain; and he continually tried, without success, to persuade Lloyd George, whom some saw as a potential collaborator, Britain's Marshal Petain, to join the Government.

Hitler was not given to magnanimity. On the contrary, as Mr. Lukacs argues, he was driven by hatred. But he was not mad; the carpet-eating monster of the popular imagination is a fiction. Mr. Lukacs sees Hitler, at least in part, as a rational statesman whose aim was to create a continental Europe dominated by Germany. (In May 1940, his fanatical hatred of the Jews may not yet have escalated into the formulation of the "final solution.") The rapid fall of Western European democracies, most notably France, seemed to confirm the flabbiness of democratic ideals. There were quite a few in Britain and the United States who found attractive the ideas of the "new order" projected by Germany.

As we know how the story turned out, and what were the horrors of Nazism, it is easy to forget -- and it is a great virtue of this study forcefully to remind us -- how appealing the idea of a negotiated peace between Britain and Germany in 1940 was to many in Britain. Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, and Rab Butler, his Under Secretary, flirted with the idea, as did quite a few other British conservatives.

After all, a negotiated peace had had a lot to be said for it during World War I; and now, with the Vichy Government about to come into place, Hitler was prepared to allow a form of France to survive. The British leadership, more so than the populace during these days of the phony war -- or, as Mr. Lukacs calls it, the reluctant war -- knew what a parlous state the country was in. Churchill was practically whistling in the dark to keep up courage, as when he admonished the country's ambassadors in Switzerland and Spain to give lavish parties to demonstrate high spirits. Mr. Lukacs persuades the reader that if Churchill had not been Prime Minister, the leadership might have given in to the temptations of a peace treaty.

He also argues, intriguingly but much less persuasively, that this was what Hitler wanted -- on his own terms of course -- and that it prompted his halt order, a decision that ultimately helped the Allies. To assist possible negotiations, according to Mr. Lukacs, Hitler may have refrained from capturing the port of Dunkirk, to which the Allies had retreated in their worst defeat of the War -- and the time thus gained allowed most of the British Army to embark safely and cross the Channel to England. But the halt order might also have been given so that the Luftwaffe could have greater flexibility to attack, or because Hitler's tank corps was too exhausted to go on and he believed that it would bog down. In fact, he did continue to plan for invasion at the same time that Mr. Lukacs maintains he was ready to offer peace. On July 16, he issued a directive, "Preparation for Landing Operation Against England." Three days later, on July 19, when the duel was at its most intense, Hitler delivered a speech of more than two hours that presented a "rational" case for peace -- to prevent death and destruction. Churchill would not reply, not being, as he said to his secretary, John Colville, "on speaking terms" with Hitler.

It became clear that though Britain was alone, Churchill was not prepared to follow the example of France and settle for a Hitlerian peace. Enraged, Hitler now turned to war in the air, first the Battle of Britain in August and then the Blitz in September. Even before that, on July 31, he had decided that he would also turn to the invasion of his ally the Soviet Union, which he fantasized might, at some future date, come to the aid of Britain. Although the invasion was not to happen until the following June, Mr. Lukacs would have it -- stretching a bit -- that the attack on Russia was conceived less because of Hitler's anti-Communist and anti-Slav obsessions than as a further attempt to isolate Britain. The irony is that the fantasy of a British-Russian alliance was in due course to be realized, although not as Hitler imagined it.

It is salutary to be reminded in this powerful study how close Hitler came to winning in 1940. At the end of that summer, victory for the Allies was a long way in the future. But with the prospect of a negotiated peace abandoned, with Franklin Roosevelt helping out Britain and with Hitler turning his attention to Russia, the pieces were falling into place.

Mr. Lukacs sets his impressive story within a framework assumed rather than proved, namely the virtues of conservative values, although radical views are not necessarily discredited by Churchill's triumph. Nonetheless, Mr. Lukacs's concluding words are true of the duel he has written about so eloquently: "A great statesman prevailed over a great revolutionary; the writer over the orator; a cosmopolitan over a racist; a democratic aristocrat over a populist demagogue; a traditionalist over a radical; a patriot over a nationalist -- during the Second World War which was a catastrophe for millions of people but whose outcome spared the world an even worse one."

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