

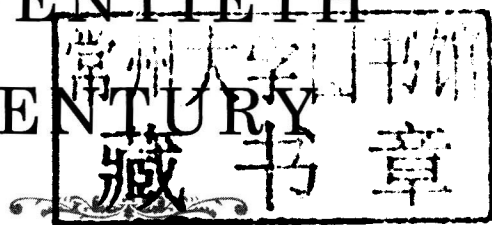


A SHORT HISTORY *of the*
TWENTIETH
CENTURY

JOHN LUKACS



A SHORT
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OF THE
TWENTIETH
CENTURY



John Lukacs

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“GOD WRITES STRAIGHT WITH CROOKED LINES”

“Century”—An American century—The German potentiality—Hitler’s primary role—1989 or 1945?—The American superpower presence—Stalin and the retreat of Russian power—The end of colonialism—Recovery and rise of China—The end of the Modern or European Age—From liberal democracy to the universality of popular sovereignty

THERE IS NO SERIOUS HISTORY of the twentieth century that I know of; but my purpose in this book is not quite filling that gap. I lived through much of the twentieth century, and I was a participant in and a historian of a few of its portions. I have devoted much of my life to asserting, teaching, and writing that “objective” and “scientific” history are inadequate desiderata; but so, too, is “subjective” history. Our historical knowledge, like nearly every kind of human knowledge, is personal and participatory, since the knower and the known, while not identical, are not and cannot be entirely separate. We do not possess truth completely. Yet pursue truth we must. So many seemingly endless and incomplete truths about the history of the twentieth century are still worth pursuing, and perhaps forever.

Now, enough of this philosophic premise. Historical knowl-

edge, nay, understanding, depends on description rather than on definition. It consists of words and sentences that are inseparable from “facts”; they are more than the wrapping of facts. “In the beginning was the Word,” and so it will be at the end of the world.

About the term “century”: it had none of its present meaning until around 1650, when it appeared in English and French. Before that, it meant a regiment of one hundred soldiers—in Latin, *centuria* (related to the term *centurion*, their commander). That appearance of a new meaning was the mark of an emerging historical consciousness. So was the appearance of words for three historical ages, Ancient, Middle, and Modern. People in the Middle Ages did not know that they were medieval people. They knew that things were changing—some of them for the worse, others for the better—but that was that. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, written by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, was published in 1920. Five hundred years before, no one, or only a very few, would have understood what that title meant. Our historical consciousness in many ways and forms had progressed by the twentieth century—so much so, that more and more people are somehow aware that we are living during the waning of the Modern Age. Even more obvious is that the twentieth century also meant the end of the European Age: another main theme, or sub-theme, of the present book. Now add to this (historically, not numerically) that the twentieth century was a short century, seventy-five years, extending from 1914 to 1989, marked by two world wars (probably the last), of which the Communist revolution and state in Russia were a consequence; and then that state too collapsed, in 1989. (The historical nineteenth century lasted longer: ninety-nine years, from the fall of Napoleon in 1815 to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.)

One more matter. The twentieth century was—an? the?—

American century. Such a statement may not surprise many of my readers; but it would have surprised many of those who lived before the First, or even the Second, World War. It should not surprise us to hear or read that 1914–1989 (and now even beyond that) has been an American century, while the nineteenth was largely a British century and the eighteenth a French one. These characterizations allude not only to military strength, naval power, and imperial possessions, but to many other kinds of influences—yet military and naval power mattered above all. The enormous events of the twentieth century, the two mountain ranges that largely determined its landscape, were the two world wars—the Second largely a consequence of the First, and the so-called Cold War almost entirely a consequence of the Second. Without their military alliance with the United States, Britain and Russia, even together, could not have won the Second World War; without America's entry into the First World War, the British and French might not have won that either, at least not in 1918. But there was more to these alliances than military and sea and air power. They meant the end of the European Age. A few Europeans had recognized this, looking at the world map even before 1914: Europe was but a peninsula of Asia.

The British—mostly their successive governments, but also much of their press—thought they had to have good relations with the United States, accepting its supremacy in some places and ways (though seldom admitting this before 1914). As late as 1895, there was a minor crisis between Washington and London regarding Venezuela. But less than three years later, in 1898, the American decision to go to war against Spain (a war that was provoked by the United States) was supported almost without exception by the British government and the British press. Thereafter, and throughout the twentieth century, there was no

instance in which a British government would strongly oppose the United States. During the fifteen years before 1914, American influence on much of British life grew. Sir James Bryce, who served as ambassador to the United States and knew the country well, went so far as to write (in his book *The American Commonwealth*): "America has in some respects anticipated European nations. She is walking before them along paths which they may probably follow." Much of this went beyond (or beneath) politics. It involved countless examples of American practices and inventions, especially in the English-speaking countries, but also in many other places throughout the world. Even more important: in 1940, Hitler came close to winning the Second World War. Had it not been for Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, he may have achieved that.

Meanwhile the British presence and influence in the United States were decreasing. Once the British Isles had been the primary source of immigrants to America, but this stream was diminishing in the fifteen years before 1914—a period when immigration from other European countries was still rapidly growing. Theodore Roosevelt, one of America's greatest presidents, was aware of this. His advocacy of a New Nationalism was not nationalism as we understand it today; rather, it was stentorian advice to the new arrivals—at that time coming especially from Eastern and Southern Europe—to become Americanized as soon as they could. This Rooseveltian advocacy was more than successful during most of the twentieth century. Nationalism, of course, has various forms and desiderata, one example of this being the United States of America. Going further, and forecasting one main argument of this book, we can say that nationalism (related to but altogether different from old-fashioned patriotism)

has been and still is the most popular and populist political sentiment in the twentieth century, almost everywhere.¹

"God writes straight with crooked lines": this is a profound and wise Portuguese proverb. Nonbelievers may find this arguable (I do not), but it does not mean that the course of world history was inevitable. Neither was the history of the United States. History does not consist of endless alternatives—but behind or during or prior to every human event, the actuality is colored by a different potentiality. For example, Germany had the potential to become the greatest power in the twentieth century. Toward the end of his life, Hitler once said that he was "Europe's last hope." (Some hope.)² Yet he did not really think of himself as a European. (Neither did he quite fathom the great dependence of Britain upon the United States.) Near the end of his life, Otto von Bismarck was reputed to have said that the most important factor in the coming twentieth century would be that Americans spoke English.

Still, there was a possibility that Germany could become a dominant power in the world. There were a few, though not many, Englishmen and Scotsmen advocating for a British alliance with Germany (some of them for racial reasons). There was considerable anti-British sentiment among the American people, and among some of their leaders as well, though it did not amount to much in the long run. But when one contemplates the history of Europe, surely before 1945, many actualities could have been different. The impact and influence of Germany—military

1. There will be extensive reference to this in later chapters.

2. On January 1, 1944, Churchill instructed his three chiefs of staff: "I hope that all expressions such as 'Invasion of Europe' or 'Assault upon the fortress of Europe' may be eliminated henceforward."

as well as political, ideological as well as cultural and intellectual, industrial as well as technological—were still increasing in 1900, in 1914, and even after the First World War, which Germany came close to winning (it came even closer to winning the Second World War, at least from 1939 to 1942). But the First World War was almost exclusively a “European War” (the official name given to it by the British government throughout that war). The Second World War was then fought on other continents and across other oceans; but the inclinations of many Americans notwithstanding, the American military and political leaders were correct in deciding early that the Allies’ defeat of Germany must have priority over the American war against Japan that would follow the collapse of Germany. Still, 80 million Germans were ranged against almost 500 million British, Americans, French, and Russians—most decisively in Europe, where it took nearly six years to conquer them.

People in the Far East may argue that the Second World War began not in September 1939 in Poland but in September 1931 in China: in that month, Japanese armies advanced from Manchuria and Korea into China proper, overrunning and occupying its main seaboard cities, penetrating the interior of the country during the next ten years—and eventually leading to war between Japan and the United States. Yet this perspective is insufficient. Japan’s ambition to establish its empire along the Far Eastern Asian mainland had existed before 1931. It was also part and parcel of the movement of anticolonialism, arising here and there before 1931. Much of this was also due to the growing evidence of uneasy sentiments among the British and French and also other European nations that were reluctant to extend or even maintain their role in some of their overseas colonies, most of them acquired during the nineteenth century. More important

was that in 1939 another war breaking out in Europe was welcomed by the Japanese.

Here I must insist on the obvious. Both world wars broke out in Europe. The events of 1914, the origins of World War I, the cascade of decisions leading to its outbreak, the various parts played by statesmen and by entire governments have been debated among historians for nearly one hundred years, and even now. Yet the outbreak of World War II was due to one man, Adolf Hitler. Had he not started a second world war in 1939, another war in Europe may have come about years later—perhaps. Had he conquered much of Europe, an American-Japanese war may have come about years later—perhaps. Yet "perhaps" and the extent of a potentiality that exists behind actuality are not the same thing.

With the above in mind, let me ask: Was the twentieth century even shorter than I (and presumably others) now see it? Did it end not in 1989 but already in 1945? I wrote that the historical landscape of the twentieth century was dominated by the enormous mountain ranges of the two world wars. Yet after 1945, the age of world wars was over. Such wars may never occur again. There has been, after all, a change in the very structure of international history. The wars after 1945 have been smaller—but their sizes do not matter much. What matters is that they have more often been wars between nations or tribes than wars between states. The existence of nations preceded the formation of states but the former will survive the latter, creating all kinds of problems.

There were other landmark changes in the history of the world after 1945. Almost all wars were now undeclared. Others were fought mainly by air. The United States had become the only superpower in the world. After 1945, most people (and many

Americans) came to think that the political landscape of the world was now marked by two superpowers—one Communist, the other not—wrestling for domination over much of the globe. This was not so. (After General de Gaulle visited the Soviet Union in 1966, he remarked that there was only one superpower in the world: the United States.) But it was not American pressure that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was the overdue breakup of the Russian Empire, including the ever more obvious nonsense of an international Communism.

Meanwhile, the presence of the United States—perhaps even more than its actual power—grew and grew. The many American military bases around the world shrank in number after 1945, as soldiers were demobilized and sent home, but the Cold War (and other influences) reversed this trend. By 1956 the United States had more than 150 ground, naval, and air bases athwart the globe. That year, the Republican Party's platform cheered them on, calling for an American military presence "all around the world." When the Cold War with the Soviet Union came to its end, there were (and still are) more than 900 such bases. There is reason to think that an American president or even a secretary of defense would not be able to list them all. Oddly enough, only a minuscule portion of the American people have ever been wholly aware of this—unlike substantial portions, probably the majorities, of the British or Dutch or Portuguese or French or Italian people, who a century before had been proud or at least in favor of their country's colonial possessions.

Americans were different. The presence of their bases abroad had little or nothing to do with the natural richness of their colonial possessions, as had been the case with most Europeans. At the same time, most Americans supported the foreign wars that