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THE LAST EUROPEAN WAR: SEPTEMBER 1939/

DECEMBER 1941

by JOHN LUKACS

562 pages. Anchor Press/Doubleday.

THE CRUCIAL YEARS: 1939-1941

by HANSON W. BALDWIN

499 pages. Harper & Row. \$20.

These two books examine the critical early years of World War II in ways so different that they can be read in succession without serious overlap.

Hanson Baldwin, who was for 26 years military editor of the *New York Times*, has produced a workman-like history ideally suited to the generation of readers that does not remember the war at all. From Chamberlain's "peace in our time" through Russia's winter war with Finland to the fall of France, the German attack on the Soviet Union and the early Japanese conquests in the Pacific, Baldwin briskly introduces the cast, recounts the action, highlights the principal dramas.

Historian-Philosopher Lukacs, by contrast, offers an almost Spenglerian vision of a civilization in crisis. Crotchety and idiosyncratic, he seems to have swallowed whole libraries of original documents in completing his research, an experience that causes him to denounce "the cancerous growth of publications" as a sign of "civilization nearing its end."

His account of the "main events" — the first third of the book — is a broad but nuanced overview, richly augmented

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with long footnotes often gleaned from eyewitness accounts of the events. Thereafter, Lukacs concentrates on the politics and ideas of the warring peoples. His section on the ferocity of nationalistic religion is horrifying: in the summer of 1941, he reports, some 100,000 Serbian Jews and Orthodox Christians were massacred by the Catholic Croats—who were often urged on by their priests. He notices small amusing details too. Discussing the prewar Americanization of Europe, he notes that one 1940 German Luftwaffe ace named his Messerschmitt "Mickey Mouse."

Lukacs—who was a teen-ager living in Hungary when the war began—also evokes what many have forgotten: how enthusiastically, even ecstatically, many people of Middle Europe welcomed Hitler at the time. Hitler, insists Lukacs, was some kind of genius, though a genius stoked almost solely by hate.

In a provocative ending, Lukacs, in disagreement with most historians, takes seriously the informal attempts by Nazi Germany to negotiate the exile of Europe's Jews to America. He suggests that only when that possibility had been closed off by U.S. entry into the war was a Gestapo plan for extermination adopted. This interpretation ignores Hitler's earlier and often stated intentions regarding the fate of the Jews. But its eccentricity does not make any less chilling Lukacs' corollary point. Only the horror of the Holocaust made anti-Semitism impossible. Feeling against the Jews was so rife that had they merely been exiled, many people in Europe might well have come to embrace the Führer's Third Reich willingly, racism and all.

