

A Review of John Lakacs' *Five Days in London May 1940*

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Five Days in London May 1940

By John Lukacs



Reviewed by Timothy Smalarz

In his *Five Days in London May 1940*, John Lukacs describes the tense events that go on in two different realms. He focuses on the relationships between the key figures of the British hierarchy and how this affects their leadership at the time, and he takes note of the decisive events between Britain and Germany which determined whether Britain would fight. Lukacs separates each crucial day in that fateful month of May 1940. By doing this, he allows the reader to reflect on how important each day was to the events leading up to World War II and to the people of Europe.

Lukacs's research is clearly and vividly seen in his close attention to detail. The book's structure allows him to meticulously employ his research to show the mood that surrounded these pressing times. He takes information from newspapers of the day and the personal papers of the central figure in this book, Winston Churchill. In using a wide variety of sources that reflect the public as well as highly personal views of the time, Lukacs takes the reader for an intimate journey into this period. He also uses many secondary sources which include personal quotes from the important figures within the British hierarchy who were coping with these events. Many personal papers of the people involved, such as Neville Chamberlain and the Earl of Halifax, are also included to give many viewpoints on the events instead of just focusing on one, Churchill's.

Lukacs's in-depth research leads him to conclude that "Hitler was never closer to his ultimate victory than during those days in May 1940."¹ In making this point, Lukacs points to various situations which could have resulted in a German victory. For instance, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was fighting Germany during these crucial days. The only ones opposing the Germans were the British, and had they, according to Lukacs, "stopped fighting," then Hitler would have won.² This is a strong argument on Lukacs's behalf because he demonstrates that if these other world powers were not involved or interested in fighting at this time except for Britain, then Hitler would have conquered Europe.

Lukacs also notes that the leaders within the British hierarchy were bitter with each other, leading to discord. Churchill was part of this discord, and received most of the bitterness from other officials. At the same time, Churchill was able to stay steadfast against Hitler at a time of a possible British defeat. His public image showed a sense of strength, which was important to the morale of Britain. The rift within the hierarchy was barely known, as Lukacs points out. This was most likely for the best, as it would have created anxiety for those in England who saw the hierarchy as strong and together. Churchill wanted to convey this idea and certainly did, according to Lukacs, by staying

strong against Hitler and not playing to his demands or threats.

At the same time, Lukacs points out that Hitler was hoping that Churchill would be knocked out of office do to the rift in the hierarchy. Hitler had become aware of this break of power with the use of intelligence in and around London during late May. This backs up once again how Lukacs has placed the emphasis on these specific five days from May 24 to 28 of 1940.

The amazing detail in which Lukacs presents these events is quite intriguing. By integrating many viable and credible sources he has added extra emphasis and importance to these days. Lukacs gives precedence to events that many people reviewing World War II may very well look over. By presenting research of how disrupted the War Cabinet of Britain was at this time, Lukacs makes clear that it is almost amazing that they did not fold to the power and strength of Hitler. With this point though, Lukacs focuses heavily on Churchill's importance to this cause and how he made sure England would not be easily defeated. In using diplomacy, Churchill gained power and respect from those who had not respected him before or during these tense days, but being the leader that he was he adverted pure humiliation. Lukacs paints Churchill as a very honest man who told it like it was, instead of sugar coating it and making the problem drift away.

Lukacs's approach is very well laid out from the outset to the end. By presenting the events within the framework of individual days, he gives importance to each of these five days. In masterfully incorporating first hand accounts along with secondary sources, he adds greater emphasis to how these five days played out from morning to end, and from individual to individual. While focused on Churchill, he allows for evaluations of other figures within the hierarchy for a better explanation of the events.

In conclusion, Lukacs's *Five Days in London May 1940* is a carefully crafted, well-researched piece of literature that adds greater emphasis to a time in the world's history. This book carefully and meticulously stays on track with the subject, while also showing different aspects of events that transpired.

Notes

1. Lukacs, John. Five Days in London May 1940. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), 187.
2. Ibid., 189.