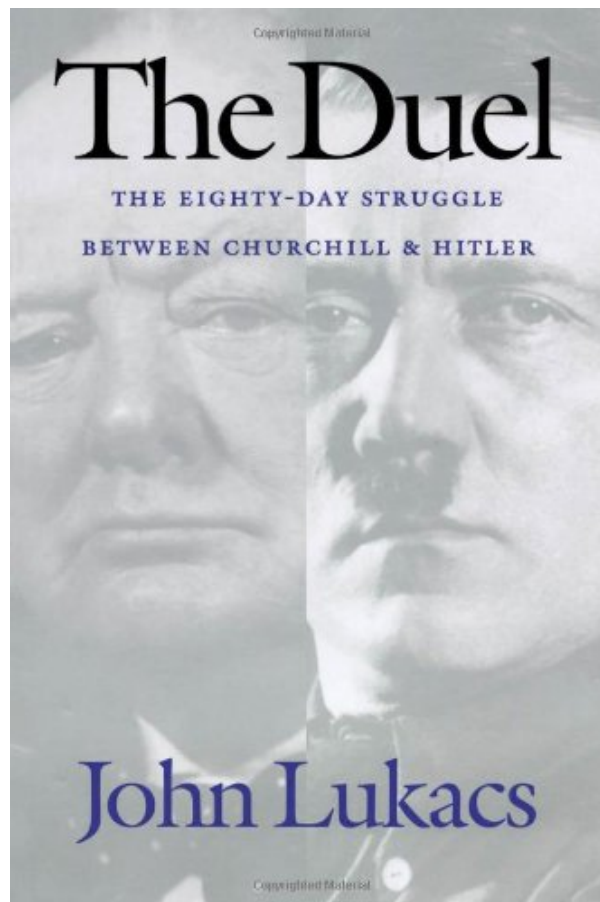
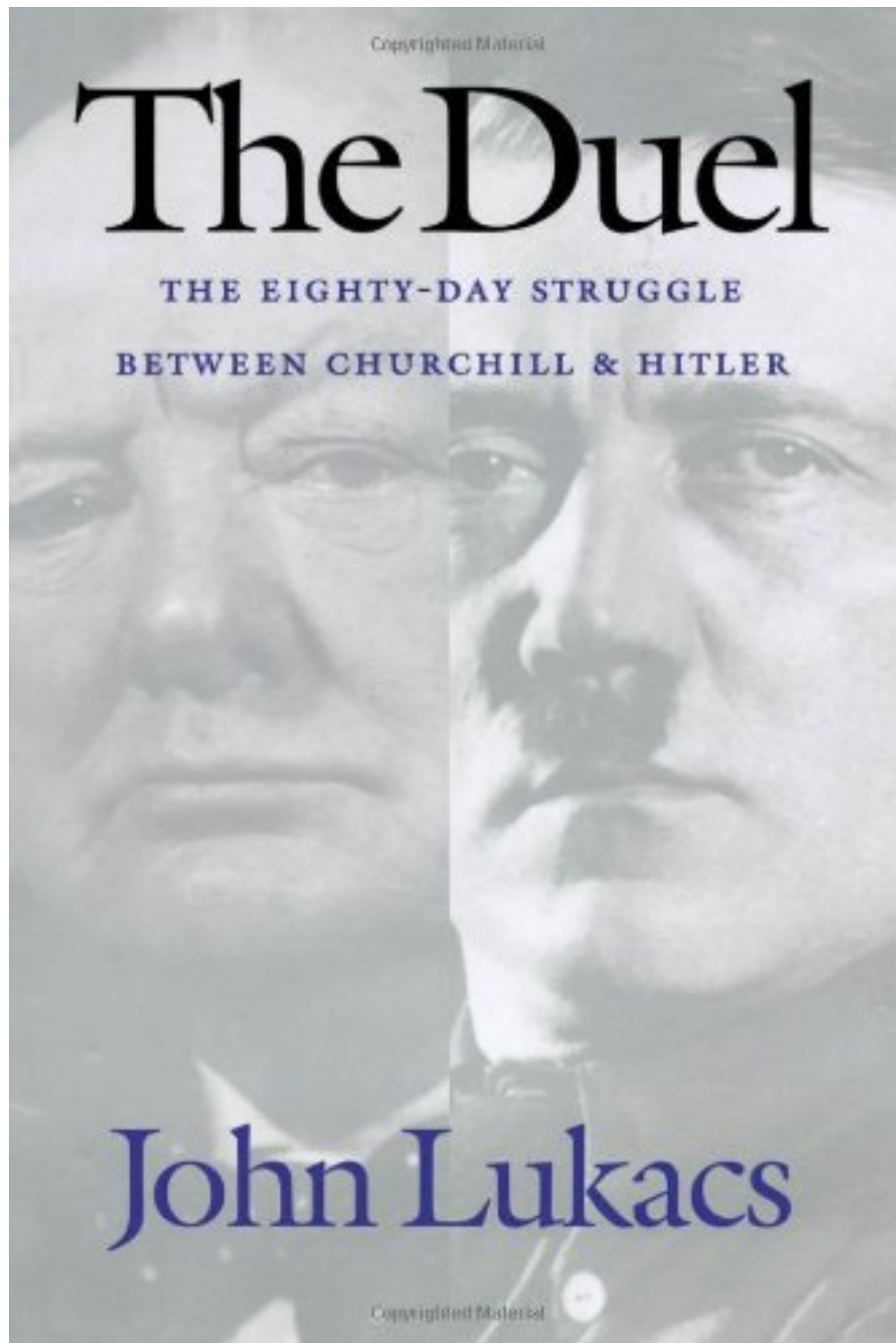


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This is a day-by-day account of the eighty-day struggle in 1940 between Hitler -- poised on the edge of absolute victory -- and Churchill -- threatened by imminent invasion and defeat.

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Most helpful customer reviews

63 of 64 people found the following review helpful.

The Greatest Crisis of the Twentieth Century

By David P. Rosenberg

This book is one of the most thrilling that I have ever read. It is about the 83-day period from May 10, 1940, on which day coincidentally Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Great Britain and Adolf Hitler launched the German Army against the Western Front, until July 31, 1940, on which day coincidentally President Franklin Roosevelt decided that America would actively support England against Germany and Hitler decided that he would not after all invade England.

The author conceives of this period as the theater of a personal duel between the titanic figures of Churchill and Hitler (as he notes, the German word is "Zweikampf", a fight of two) during which Hitler had his best

chance of winning what Lukacs called in an earlier book "the last European war". That this figure of monstrous gifts, as he is described by the author, did not win was the achievement of Churchill, who knew after the fall of France that England and its Commonwealth could not prevail against the power of Germany without America and Russia on its side, but willed that England would not negotiate with Germany until events or persuasion would bring these powers into the war against Naziism. Lukacs acknowledges that the overwhelming power of Russia and America was necessary to defeat Germany, but Churchill's achievement was that England did not lose the war.

In a later book, "Five Days in London, May, 1940", the author focuses on the period from May 24 to May 28, 1940 within the period of *The Duel*. Although this five-day period preceded the fall of France, Lukacs identifies it as the period of most acute crisis because the British War Cabinet came close to deciding that England should begin cease-fire negotiations with Germany. It was Churchill's eloquence and force of character that swayed the members of the government, and ultimately the British people, to reject this idea and fight on alone until Germany launched the invasion of Russia. In "The Duel" he deals with this crisis in a chapter called "The Slippery Slope", a metaphor used by the participants to describe the demoralization of the British public that would have resulted from peace negotiations that might have resulted in a surrender to Germany's demands.

Another reviewer has remarked, correctly I think, that there is some overlap and repetition in the several books by the author that deal with Churchill and/or Hitler. However, the author possesses such a powerful narrative drive and brilliance of insight into the psychology of his subjects and significance of events that the repetition of phrases from one book to the next has the effect of a recurring melody in a symphony.

I have had the privilege to meet and talk with the author about his work. In my first conversation with him about "The Duel" I told him that from his book I had learned both how close Hitler came to winning the war and how much we owe to Churchill. He commented that I had understood his book very well.

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

The Race is Not to the Swift, Nor the Battle to the Strong.

By Lonya

John Lukacs' book "The Duel" calls to mind the classic hypothetical paradox that asks what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. In this instance the irresistible force was Adolf Hitler and his armed forces and the immovable object was Winston Churchill.

The duel that is the subject of this book takes place in the tumultuous 80-day period between May 10, 1940 and July 30, 1940. Lukacs surrounds the recitation of this 80-day period with two coincidences. On May 10, 1940 Churchill became Prime Minister, replacing Neville Chamberlain. At the same time the battle for Western Europe began in earnest when Hitler launched land and air attacks on Holland, Luxembourg, and Belgium. On July 31, 1940 Hitler began making formal plans for the invasion of the USSR. On that same day U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt decided to go forward with a lend-lease program that would provide the British navy with 50 aging, but much needed destroyers.

Events in May and early June provided evidence that Hitler and his advancing armies were something of an irresistible force. The German army and air force made quick work of Holland, Luxembourg, and Belgium. France and its forces were defeated in short order as well. At the same time, in these dark early days, Churchill's hold on power was tenuous at best. As Lukacs is quick to point out, the ousted Chamberlain was more popular amongst Conservative party loyalists. Churchill's only real popular support according to surveys cited by Lukacs came from working class (labour) voters. Hitler and the U.S. Ambassador to Britain Joseph Kennedy both seemed to think that, if anything, Churchill was an easily removable force. Facts, as Lukacs points, proved both Hitler and Joseph Kennedy wrong.

*The Duel* is set out in a point-counterpoint fashion. It alternates between examining the war from the German

and then British viewpoint. Although Lukacs is a long-time admirer of Churchill (and with good reason) his analysis of events and of the character and judgments of both Churchill and Hitler seems both astute and objective. Lukacs avoids the easy picture of Hitler as madman and is quite prepared to give him credit for the efficacy of his military plans and his ability to think rationally (and often brilliantly) about military and political developments in Western Europe. Similarly, Lukacs is not above criticizing some of Churchill's decisions or pointing out many of the mis-steps that occurred during this period.

The critical events of the 80 days covered by Lukacs seem to me to be the successful evacuation of 350,000 British and French troops from Dunkerque in early June, Hitler's subsequent decision to not proceed with plans for the invasion of Britain, and his eventual decision at the end of July to invade Russia. Lukacs makes it clear that the German armies could have been a bit more aggressive and could have taken most of those evacuated from Dunkerque prisoner. Yet Hitler grew unusually cautious at this critical juncture. There is some evidence to suggest that Hitler thought the British would seek peace in short order but Lukacs suggests that this evidence may not be totally persuasive. Lukacs does suggest however, that if those troops had not been evacuated successfully the forces in Britain seeking reconciliation or negotiation with Hitler may have won the day.

The 'duel' ends in a stalemate. Five gruesome years of war would follow. However, in terms of the classic irresistible force/immovable object paradox the stalemate clearly benefited the immovable object. Churchill, as a rational thinker, could not have entertained the belief that he could have won any major battles during this period. However, the commodity most precious to him and for the future of parliamentary democracy in Britain, was not victory but time. Britain needed time to gather strength and, most importantly, time to seek assistance from the United States. That assistance was very slow in coming. Roosevelt was in the middle of an election campaign and the forces of isolation were still very strong in the United States. By doing enough to forestall invasion, and aided by Hitler's decision to divert attention to the Soviet Union, Churchill gained the time he needed. The British armed forces were not particularly swift nor strong but in time they would be. Churchill's desperate struggle to 'buy' that time may in fact represent his finest hours.

The Duel is a very readable popular history of a very critical time in Europe's (and the world's history). His portrayal of both Hitler and Churchill seems balanced and objective. This is a very well written book that can be enjoyed equally by casual or serious students of this period. It is a good book and it is well worth reading.

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

Good work but repetitive

By Mattias Borjesson

John Lukacs is without doubt one of the most creative and original historians of our time. To add further to his credit he writes as fine as any novelist, probably better than most of them. And most of his perspectives and theories are original thought provoking, and so much based on common sense and insights that they are almost impossible to prove wrong.

In this interesting and compelling study Lukacs shows that, in May 1940 there really were a turning point in the historical development of the 20th century. He also shows that Hitler there and then, could have won the war if Britain would have given up. Lukacs criticize the idea that the "great-men" have no influence in the historical flow, and the marxist idea that only the great workings of the masses of people, and economical development is the engine of History. Lukacs again points out that without Hitler, Stalin or Churchill the history of the 20th century would have been much different. In "The Duel" he points out Churchill as the driving force to make the British continue in their resistance to Hitler. In the psychological duel that continued over the 80 days Churchill succeeded to rally the entire British people behind him. Hitler, who never thought of invading Britain, because he was convinced the British would give in, when France was conquered. First in July did he realize that Britain would continue the war alone, that he would have to

invade Britain to end the war. But then it was already too late, when the German Air Force was unsuccessful in destroying the RAF, he postponed the invasion of Britain. Later as Lukacs shows, he convinced himself that to invade Russia would be better. His main argument before the invasion of Russia was that it was the only way to make Germany the sole ruler of Europe, and with the entire continent's vast material resources at his disposal, he would be untouchable even by the awesome powers of a future UK-US alliance.

All this is well written and makes a great deal of common sense. But there is one disturbing annoyance. Having read a couple of Lukacs books, is that he continues to repeat the same themes in book after book, soon you have read it all before, and know exactly what points are going to come next. Approximately one third of this book I had read before in his other books and that is really disturbing. I can understand that the author wants to clarify his points, and his remarkable many good insights, in all his books, but the reader wants new and different perspectives. Although a great book if this is the first time you read one of Lukacs' books, it's repetitive for those more familiar with Lukacs' other works.

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