

## Jewish Political Studies Review

knowledgeed inspiration, Hillel Halkin: “A religion that can speak only to its own adherents diminishes them as well.”

Although he rebuts “the challenge of universalism,” Maghen at first grants “the challenge of rationalism” leveled by the Jewish Hare Krishna: “Judaism makes absolutely no sense for this day and age.” Indeed, Maghen’s extraordinary gifts as a comic writer are never more on display than in his Voltairean mockery of, among many other Jewish practices, kashrut, the *eruv*, *shemittah*, *shaatnez*, circumcision, and (most hilariously) the “existentialist threat” of bread at Passover. But mockery is not rejection because life is not logic. Man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal. This might have been said without recounting the history of Western philosophy, but Maghen is a talented writer who lacks the gift of knowing when to stop; and the inordinate length of his argument for Romance over Rationality nearly derails the book.

It is not entirely the obtuseness of publishers that explains why *John Lennon and the Jews* is a self-published book. Maghen’s spelling and diction are often atrocious. For example, he compulsively misuses the word methodology, usually a favorite of virgin minds seduced by the temptation of three extra syllables into saying something different from what they intend (“method”). This is a pity, because Maghen’s is not a virgin mind, but a mature one that has taken full account of the constant burden of peril, spiritual as well as physical, with which the Jewish people currently lives.

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## A PARTIAL POLITICAL EDUCATION

*Best of Times, Worst of Times: Memoirs of a Political Education*, by Walter Laqueur, Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2009, 338 pp.

Reviewed by MORDECHAI NISAN

This is the autobiographical account of a man of culture and worldliness who lived on three continents, authored scores of books and articles, and probed the intricacies of history and politics. In this volume Walter Laqueur displays a breadth of knowledge and a penetrating intellectual capacity. He was born in Germany in 1921, later fled the Nazi demon and experienced life in Europe, settled in prestate

Israel and independent Israel for a number of years, and resided in London, Paris, and Washington, all the while forging a remarkable career as writer and thinker, analyst and researcher of matters political. He now shares his rather spectacular, self-styled “political education” with readers.

Laqueur was always aware that his understanding of culture and politics was forged by integrating eyewitness experiences with extensive reading of history and contemporary events. He therefore brought to his voluminous writings over many decades, dealing with Germany and Europe, communism and the Soviet Union, Israel and the Arab countries in the Middle East, the perspective of an “insider” with the erudition of a scholar. Of central importance in his political education were his awareness of reality, a healthy suspicion of self-delusion, and but a small dose of optimism in the resolution of political conflicts.

Common sense pervades Laqueur’s assessments of the dynamics of societies and the conduct of politics. He relates how the role of Hitler was probably the essential reason for the rise of Nazism in Germany inasmuch as Germany was not a quintessentially anti-Semitic European country, unlike Poland or Russia. Later Laqueur explains the difficulty of many from the 1930s on to recognize the evil in Stalinist communism, commenting that: “It is only human to persist in error rather than to admit mistakes” (95). With the dawning of the Cold War, the Left was still soft on the Soviet Union and often viciously anti-American in its political judgments. But even Stalin himself could be imprisoned in a false paradigm as when he swallowed Hitler’s lies and refused to consider that the Nazis would perpetrate a surprise military attack, as they did in 1941.

Although Laqueur came to see Soviet communism and German Nazism as manifest forces for totalitarianism and conquest in the twentieth century, Islam was not on his political radar screen. He admits that “for a long time” after the Second World War, “I underrated the political importance of nationalism and religion...because I was not subject to strong nationalist and religious feelings [and] I tended to underrate their importance in other parts of the world” (16). As a self-styled Western intellectual of the Left, he confessed his mistake on this subject. He did not, however, underestimate the significant place of terrorism and guerrilla warfare in modern conflicts, though he markedly avoids pointing the finger at the Palestinians for their justly deserved notoriety as pioneers and practitioners of violence in the second half of the twentieth century in pursuing political goals.

This rather gaping lacuna ill-reflects on the wisdom and insight that Laqueur otherwise shows regarding political topics. He poses good questions on major issues; his is a mind buoyed by curiosity and rigor concerning the resurgence of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-Americanism of German intellectuals, the decline of Europe and the rise of Asia, and the general shift of global power from West to East.

But one topic where Laqueur is forthright and opinionated concerns “the con-

tinuing occupation of Arab settled territories after 1967 [which] has been a disaster; successive Israeli governments have not followed wise policies vis-à-vis their Arab neighbors and their Arab minority” (139–140). Placing himself on the “center-left” of the political spectrum in the course of his intellectual odyssey can explain this blunt verdict, though he fails to explain the nature of the “disaster.” Apparently the entire Israeli national adventure in modern times has largely left Laqueur cold, for he is a European in culture and spirit, and a Westerner in civilizational and political outlook. His education was in Europe and he fundamentally became a historian of Europe. All of that is perfectly fine, and he made an impressive mark as author and editor of books and journals, while never escaping his Jewish origins or the Jewish dimension of his critical savvy. For Israel, while not his personal choice, was yet part of his life, and also the target of some of his criticism.

This readable autobiography is full of both thoughts and anecdotes, an insider’s depiction of Jewish life in Nazi Germany and of life riding the intellectual currents in Europe and America after the Second World War. Laqueur also wrote extensively on the Middle East, such as his book *The Road to War* dealing with the 1967 military clash, and lived to see some developments—like the rise of militant Islam and the national vigor of Jewish Israel—that superseded some of his own political forecasts and personal sensitivities. Laqueur’s characteristic political sobriety was notable and consistent, though when it came to Israel, as when he proposed that Jerusalem become the capital of two states (133), one might wonder why the “Jerusalem syndrome” of ecstatic utopianizing swept away the reasonableness of a sound political education.

DR. MORDECHAI NISAN’S most recent book is *Only Israel West of the River: The Jewish State and the Palestinian Question*, available at Amazon.com and CreateSpace.com/3584834.



## THE HOLOCAUST IN ARAB EYES

*From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, by Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, Columbia University Press, 2009, 435 pp.

Reviewed by Arnon Groiss

Several years ago a group of Israeli Arabs, men and women from various walks of life, visited the Auschwitz death camp on an organized tour. An Israeli Jewish re-