



The Three Wars of Bernard Lewis

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ABSTRACT

The career of Bernard Lewis was punctuated by three wars: World War II, the Cold War, and what he himself called “the crisis of Islam.” The article seeks to demonstrate that for Lewis, these wars formed a continuum, the common thread being the struggle to defend freedom and democracy against the forces of tyranny.

KEYWORDS

Arabs; Bernard Lewis; Cold War; democracy; freedom; Iraq War; Islam; War on Terror; World War II

I don’t come to the subject of Bernard Lewis as a disinterested observer. I first met him in 1976, when I was a graduate student at Princeton and he was a recently arrived transplant from London. By progression, he became my teacher, Ph.D. adviser, professional mentor, and personal friend.

There were thirty-eight years between us. But the age difference never seemed to matter much. Indeed, he seemed to defy aging. This he attributed to good genes, a daily walk, and a scotch each evening before dinner. In 1996, I organized a conference in honor of his eightieth birthday, thinking it would pretty much cap the final act of his career.¹ Who could have imagined that, five years later, he would be the author of two *New York Times* bestsellers, and appear on the stage as a true celebrity?

But he didn’t continue to speak and write simply because he could. True, no one had his combination of profound knowledge and clear exposition. But that isn’t why he refused to surrender to old age. He came up for another round of intellectual combat, and then another, because a fire burned within him.

That fire never burned more intensely than at times of war, in particular when freedom and democracy came under attack. This happened in World War II, the Cold War, and what might be called, after one of his book titles, the “crisis of Islam.” While each of these wars had its own name, time frame, and theater, I hope to show that, for Lewis, they formed a continuum.

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¹The proceedings appeared as Martin Kramer, ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv, Israel: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1999).

“Seminal experience”

In 2006, Lewis, then ninety, told an interviewer this: “The most vividly remembered year of my life was the year 1940.”² I submit that 1940 is essential to understanding what drove Bernard Lewis: the year of Dunkirk and the fall of France, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz; the year of “blood, toil, tears and sweat,” “their finest hour.” (And a year when Britain fought alone, while America stood on the sidelines.) The historian Lawrence James has described the “spirit of 1940” as “a sense of national unity and purpose which was unprecedented and will probably never be revived.”³ Lewis was twenty-three years old, already regarded as a prodigy, if not a genius. One of the last things he did before his mobilization was to rush his doctoral thesis into print.⁴ Lewis didn’t regard it as a finished product, but he published it anyway because he wasn’t sure what fate the war held in store for him.

Lewis was always reticent when it came to the details of his five years of service. He spent some time at Bletchley Park, helping to break codes; in 1941, he moved over to MI6, Britain’s foreign intelligence branch. He described his task there as “translating texts, mostly from Arabic.... For much of the time it was just a desk job.”⁵ Later, some admirers and detractors fancifully cast him as “Lewis of Arabia.” Far from it. Only in the summer of 1945, when the war was almost over, did his duties take him to the Middle East. Otherwise, he said, “I spent the greater part of the Blitz years living, working and, more remarkably, sleeping in London.”⁶

As it happened, this was far more dangerous than any place in the Middle East; 43,000 civilians perished in the Blitz. In terms of deaths, that comes to almost two 9/11 attacks a month for eight months of almost ceaseless bombing. Yet morale held, and Lewis was a case in point. In his memoirs, he recalled that, at first, he took shelter in underground rail stations. “But I soon got tired of this,” he wrote, “and decided to stay in my bed and take my chances. One can get used to anything.”⁷ Many years later, in 1991, he found himself in Tel Aviv when some Iraqi Scuds fell on the city. The Israelis, some of whom were seized by panic, disappointed him: a few dozen raining Scuds, he said, were like a quiet night in London in 1940.

“In 1940,” Lewis later said, “we knew who we were, we knew who the enemy was, we knew the dangers and the issues. In our island, we knew we would prevail, that the Americans would be drawn into the fight.”⁸ But the

²“Islam and the West: A Conversation with Bernard Lewis,” interview conducted by Luis Lugo, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 27, 2006, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/04/27/islam-and-the-west-a-conversation-with-bernard-lewis/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

³Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1996), 484.

⁴Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Isma’ilism* (Cambridge, England: Heffer, 1940).

⁵Bernard Lewis with Buntzie Ellis Churchill, *Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian* (New York, NY: Viking, 2012), 56.

⁶*Ibid.*, 57.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Bernard Lewis, quoted by Fouad Ajami, “A Sage in Christendom,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2006.

war shattered the complacency of a generation: freedom and democracy were fragile constructs, they had determined enemies, and in a moment's hesitation, they might be extinguished.

In September 1945, at war's end, Lewis wrote a poem, entitled "The Dirge."⁹ It dwells not on victory, but on its terrible cost. Here is the first verse:

In the bleakness of German plains,
In the stillness of English woods,
In the squalor of Polish towns,
In the clamour of London streets,
I see them die.

I don't believe Lewis often shared his emotions about these years. But make no mistake: the war that reduced much of civilized Europe to ruins, left Britain shabby and impoverished, and exterminated Europe's Jews became Lewis's prism on the world. He later called the war "the seminal experience of my life."¹⁰ Of his own generation, he wrote that "their every thought, their whole lives were dominated and indeed shaped by the titanic struggles in which they had participated or witnessed."¹¹

That was also true of Lewis. He would be ever vigilant in his defense of liberal democracy, lest it ever again be threatened with extinction. Nor could he forget, that in freedom's most imperiled and "finest hour," many Arabs had sided with the enemy. After all, he had spent the war translating evidence of their collaboration. This convinced him that the later iterations of Arab nationalism, from Palestine to Syria to Iraq, had their ideological origins in Nazi wartime subversion and propaganda.

"Like the Nazis"

World War II was followed by the Cold War. For Lewis's generation, this gave rise to some ambivalence. Lewis would later admit that "while I never became a full-fledged Marxist, I was very much aware of Marxist thought and categories." He once described his own early approach to history as "quasi-Marxist."¹² In 1953, he said this:

I grew up in a generation which was deeply affected by what was happening in Russia, and which felt, generally speaking, that, with all the brutalities and crimes of the Russian revolution, it nevertheless represented something valuable and significant for humanity—"bliss was it in that dawn to be alive"—and I am

⁹Lewis, *Notes on a Century*, 351.

¹⁰Ibid., 77.

¹¹Ibid., 103.

¹²Ibid., 273.

therefore perhaps able to understand something of the attraction as well as of the repulsion of the Communist creed.¹³

Its attraction, he added, was that it had “perverted to its service some of the noblest aspirations of the human race—peace, social justice, the brotherhood of man—and has used them with deadly effect.”¹⁴

Very early in the Cold War, Lewis identified the Soviet Union as the prime threat to the world his generation had fought to save. Indeed, for Lewis, World War II and the Cold War melded into one. “Like the Nazis,” Lewis wrote, “the Communists are anti-Western in the double sense—they are against the Western Powers and they are also against the Western way of life.”¹⁵ It was precisely this anti-Westernism that allowed the Soviets to “secure a degree of indulgence and good-will [in Asia and Africa] denied to the Western powers. It was for the same reasons, and among the same circles, that the Nazis in their day were able to rally so much support in the Middle East for their war against the Western powers and Western democracy. And today the crisis is far more acute.”¹⁶ In particular, he saw the Arabs preferring the Soviet Union, “for the same reason,” as he put it, “that their predecessors had preferred the Third Reich.”¹⁷

As in World War II, so in the Cold War, this was a bitter struggle. “In the ’50s,” he later said, “the choices before us still retained something of the clarity, even the starkness, which they had through the war years.”¹⁸ And as against Nazism, so against Communism, there was no guarantee of victory. “I am by no means certain,” he wrote, “that [democracy] represents the common destiny of mankind.”¹⁹ In the Middle East, only democratic Turkey and democratic Israel were reliable: the Turks, because they had long experience of Russian imperialism; the Jews because of their long experience of Russian antisemitism. Turkey and Israel were forward positions against the enemies of freedom, deserving of full support.

In America, there were many who saw things as Lewis saw them. And I imagine that, at any time, Lewis could have crossed the Atlantic permanently. But he settled late in the United States, in 1974, at the age of fifty-eight, and almost missed his moment. When he arrived for good, the “Scoop” Jackson Democrats embraced him. But by then, the United States had already begun to roll back the Soviets in the Middle East.

¹³Bernard Lewis, “Communism and Islam,” *International Affairs* 30, no. 1 (1954): 1. The quote is from the English romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850), expressing his feelings at the commencement of the French Revolution.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶Bernard Lewis, “The Middle Eastern Reaction to Soviet Pressures,” *Middle East Journal* 10, no. 2 (1956): 131.

¹⁷Lewis, *Notes on a Century*, 81.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁹Lewis, “Communism and Islam,” 2.

“Bring them freedom”

Lewis in America would be much more influential in defining what he once called “the return of Islam” as the next threat to freedom and democracy. That was the title of his famously prescient article published in *Commentary* in 1976.²⁰ The Iranian revolution in 1978 made the threat apparent in ways even he hadn’t anticipated. By the time the Twin Towers came down on 9/11, no one had done as much to flag the danger as Bernard Lewis. In his first war—World War II—Lewis had been a bit player; in his second, the Cold War, a supporting actor; but in this one, he would play the lead.

There is a vast misunderstanding of how Lewis conceived of this war. It can be attributed to the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington. When Huntington came up with his “clash of civilizations,” he credited Lewis with first use of the phrase.²¹ Technically, this was correct—Lewis coined it as early as 1955, to describe the history of conflict between Islam and Christendom.²²

But Lewis was uncomfortable with the way Huntington generalized his turn of phrase. On one occasion, he described Huntington’s thesis to me as “too harsh,” and in one of his revised books, he replaced “clash” (between civilizations) with “encounter.”²³ So it is unfortunate that so many obituaries focused on Lewis as the source of Huntington’s concept. That wasn’t how he saw the world.

Lewis did believe in a perpetual clash—not between civilizations, but between freedom and tyranny. The threat to freedom could emerge from any civilization, including, obviously, Europe’s; and democracy could take root in any civilization, despite its origins in Europe. “Anyone,” he asserted, “anywhere in the world... [could] develop democratic institutions of a kind.”²⁴ Lewis believed that Islamism and extremes of Arabism were implacable foes of freedom and democracy. But he thought that Islam, the faith,

²⁰Bernard Lewis, “The Return of Islam,” *Commentary* 61, no. 1 (January 1976): 39–49. For an analysis of this article and its significance, see Martin Kramer, “The Return of Bernard Lewis,” *Mosaic Magazine*, June 1, 2016, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2016/06/the-return-of-bernard-lewis/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

²¹Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 32. Huntington sourced the phrase to Lewis’s 1990 article “The Roots of Muslim Rage” in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

²²In his memoirs, *Notes on a Century*, 235, Lewis misplaced his first use of the phrase. “My earliest recorded reference to the much-discussed ‘clash of civilizations,’” he wrote, “occurred at a conference held at the School of Advanced International Studies [SAIS] of the Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., in the last week of August 1957.... The proceedings of the conference were published [in 1958] in a volume entitled *Tensions in the Middle East*.” In fact, he first used it at a conference for corporate executives at SAIS on December 13, 1955. That version was published as Lewis, “The Middle Eastern Reaction to Soviet Pressures,” with the reference on p. 130 as follows: “What we are seeing in our time is no less than a clash between civilizations—more specifically, a revolt of the world of Islam against the shattering impact of Western civilization which, since the 18th century, has dislocated and disrupted the old order, bringing much that is new and valuable, but also imposing terrible problems of transition and adjustment.”

²³In the 1994 revision of his 1964 book *The Middle East and the West*. The revised version: “We shall be better able to understand this situation if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between states or nations but as an encounter between civilizations.” Bernard Lewis, *The Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 158.

²⁴Bernard Lewis, *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 160.

wasn't antithetical to either. With Western and especially American encouragement and assistance, Arab societies could evolve their own forms of democracy.

Alas, if the Cold War lacked some of the starkness of World War II, this new and unnamed war, this "crisis of Islam," seemed even more baffling than the Cold War. As Lewis himself acknowledged, "it is different today... we don't know the issues, and we still do not understand the nature of the enemy."²⁵ Was it Islam? Islamism? Terrorism? Global Jihad? "We are weak and undecided and irresolute," Lewis complained. "But I think the effort must be made. Either we bring them freedom, or they destroy us."²⁶

This is the voice of 1940 speaking. And at a simple reading, it seems like a jarring exaggeration. The Nazis might have destroyed us if we hadn't defeated them and freed Germany. The Soviets could have finished us in a morning. But who could today? Could any terrorist group, any Arab regime, or even Iran come close to posing such a threat?

No. But this statement shouldn't be read as a specific warning. It was Lewis's way of insisting that we must never take freedom and democracy for granted, as though they were the established ways of humankind. In World War II and the Cold War, tyranny never surrendered; it only retreated when defeated. And unless it is defeated where it still reigns, it might gradually, at first imperceptibly, roll back that which we have gained at such great cost, and ultimately confront us with the stark choices of 1940 once more.

Lewis, in the last chapter in his life, longed to see one more decisive victory within that civilization to which he had devoted his scholarly life. He thought he glimpsed its beginnings in Iraq. Iraq, he said in 2008, when everyone had gone sour on it, "is being ruled by a democracy, by a free, elected government that faces a free opposition. It proves what is often disputed, that the development of democratic institutions in a Muslim Arab country is possible.... What is happening in Iraq I find profoundly encouraging."²⁷

Call this folly, call it hubris, call it the triumph of hope over experience. But also admit that it rests firmly upon the most fundamental belief we all share: that all of humankind is created equal, and deserves to govern itself by what Lewis once called "the best and most just form of government yet devised by man."²⁸

It is too early to say how Bernard Lewis will be remembered. But if the Middle East ever finds its way to democracy, he will deserve to be recalled as the prophet of its freedom.

²⁵Quoted by Ajami, "A Sage in Christendom."

²⁶Bernard Lewis, "Freedom and Justice in Islam," *Imprimis* 35, no. 9 (September 2006), <https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/freedom-and-justice-in-islam/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

²⁷"Seven Questions: Bernard Lewis on the Two Biggest Myths about Islam," *ForeignPolicy.com*, August 20, 2008, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2008/08/20/seven-questions-bernard-lewis-on-the-two-biggest-myths-about-islam/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

²⁸Lewis, "Communism and Islam," 2.

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