

## The Short Century—It's Over

SOURCE: From John Lukacs, From *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age* (1993)

BACKGROUND: *Historians have traditionally been interested in dividing their study and analysis of civilizations into eras or periods that make some sense—ideally that begin and end with some watershed developments and have some unifying characteristics. This is particularly difficult to do for our own time, for we lack some historical perspective. In the following selection John Lukacs, writing in 1991 before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, argues that in 1989 watershed events occurred in the West, bringing the 20<sup>th</sup> century to an end and initiating the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

CONSIDER: *How Lukacs supports his argument; whether his argument works as well for the non-Western world; what this might mean for the future.*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is now over, and there are two extraordinary matters about this.

First, this was a short century. It lasted 75 years, from 1914 to 1989. Its two principal events were the two world wars. They were the two enormous mountain ranges that dominated its landscape. The Russian Revolution, the atom bomb, the end of the colonial empires, the establishment of the Communist states, the emergence of the two superpowers, the division of Europe and of Germany—all of these were the consequences of the two world wars, in the shadow of which we were living, until now.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century lasted exactly 99 years, from 1815 to 1914, from the end of Napoleon's wars to the start of the—so called—First World War. The 18<sup>th</sup> century lasted 126 years, from 1689 to 1815, from the beginning of the world war between England and France (of which the American War of Independence was but part) until their end at Waterloo.

Second, we know that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is over. In 1815, no one knew that this was the end of the Atlantic world wars and the beginning of the Hundred Years' Peace. At that time, everyone, friends as well as enemies of the French Revolution, were concerned with the prospect of great revolutions surfacing again. There were revolutions after 1815, but the entire history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the absence of world wars during 99 years. Its exceptional prosperity and progress were due to that.

In 1689, the very word "century" was hardly known. The "Oxford English Dictionary" notes its first present usage, in English, in 1626. Before that the word meant a Roman military unit of 100 men; then it began to have another meaning, that of 100 years. It marked the beginning of our modern historical consciousness.

We know that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is over—not merely because of our historical consciousness (which is something different from a widespread knowledge of history) but mainly because the confrontation of the two superpowers, the outcome of the Second World War, has died down. The Russians have retreated from Eastern Europe and Germany has been reunited. Outside Europe, even the Korean and the Vietnam wars, the missile crisis in Cuba and other political crises such as Nicaragua were, directly or indirectly, involved with that confrontation.

In 1991, we live in a very different world, in which both the U.S. and the Soviet Union face grave problems with peoples and dictators in the so-called third world. Keep in mind that the ugly events in Lithuania are no exception to this: They involve the political structure of the Soviet Union itself. Even its name, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, is becoming an anachronism, as once happened with the Holy Roman Empire.

Keep in mind, too, that no matter when and how the gulf war ends, the so-called Middle East will remain a serious problem both for the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Even in the case of a smashing American political

or military victory, its beneficial results will be ephemeral. To think—let alone speak—of a Pax Americana in the Middle East is puerile nonsense.

Not only the configuration of great powers and their alliances but the very structure of political history has changed. Both superpowers have plenty of domestic problems. In the Soviet Union, this has now become frighteningly actual; in the U.S., the internal problems are different but not superficial. The very sovereignty and cohesion of states, the authority and efficacy of the governments are not what they were.

Are we going to see ever larger and larger political units? “Europe” will, at best, become a free-trade economic zone, but a Union of Europe is a mirage. Or are we more likely going to see the break-up of several states into small national ones? Are we going to see a large-scale migration of millions of peoples, something that has not happened since the last centuries of the Roman Empire? This is at least possible. The very texture of history is changing before our very eyes.

Are we not on the threshold of a new Dark Ages? We must hope not. The main task before us is the rethinking of the word “progress.” Like that of “century,” the meaning of that word, too, is more recent than we have been accustomed to thing. Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that is, before the opening of the so-called modern age (another misnomer, suggesting that this age would last forever) progress simply meant an advance in distance, not in time, without the sense of evolutionary improvement.

Thereafter, the word “progress” began to carry the unquestionable optimistic meaning of endless material and scientific promise, until, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it began to lose some of its shine, because of the increasingly questionable benefits of technology. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technology and barbarism seemed to be antitheses. They no longer are. But technology and its threat to the natural environment are only part of the larger problem of progress, a word and an ideal whose more proper and true application is the task of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that has already begun.