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EDITORIAL

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Walter Laqueur once observed that only pessimists survived the Holocaust. Optimists believed that Hitler could either be controlled or that commonsense and decency would somehow eventually prevail. Fittingly perhaps, his penultimate book was titled, *Reflections of a Veteran Pessimist*. "Having spent some of my formative years in a particularly nasty and brutal dictatorship," Walter explained, "immunized me against a certain facile optimism frequently found in the United States. But an overreaction had also to be resisted: not every tin-pot authoritarian leader is a Hitler and not every dangerous trend or development leads to a cosmic disaster."[1] He is therefore among the last of a generation that grew up in abject sorrow but nonetheless tried to build a better world.

Pessimism coupled with a predilection to avoid the over-exaggeration of threats were traits that made Walter among the finest analysts and historians of terrorism—the subject of his final book, *The Future of Terrorism: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Alt-Right*, published in 2018 when he was 97 years old.[2] His death would be sufficiently devastating to the field of terrorism studies alone. It is all the more incomprehensible when one realizes that Walter wrote seminal works on Soviet and Russian politics and history as well as on Europe and the Middle East, communism, fascism, intelligence, the Holocaust, Zionism, and anti-Semitism. A particularly prescient example of Walter's incisive analysis may be found in *Black Hundred*, his book on Russia's extreme right, published in 1993. "Let us summarize the case of the Russian nationalist," he wrote.

> Three centuries of Russian history were undone in a few days in August 1991 as the result of the weakness of the center. To save the remnant, a spiritual as well as political renaissance is needed, a return to the national and religious values of the Russian people. It is pointless to embrace Western values and to copy Western institutions. … The watershed is not between left and right, but between those who believe in freedom and humanistic values, in a state ruled by law, and those who reject these values with contempt.[3]

His 2015 book, *Putinism*,[4] was published to laudatory reviews two decades later.[5]

Walter was fluent in at least half a dozen languages, wrote or edited more than fifty books that were published in English, and three times that figure if one includes foreign language editions. He held academic appointments at Harvard, Brandeis, Chicago, Johns Hopkins, Tel Aviv, and Georgetown universities but himself never obtained a university degree. Hitler's rise to power had disrupted an otherwise halcyon childhood as an only child growing up in his still-beloved Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland). "I once spent a lonely week in the Sahara desert," Walter began the memoir of his youth, *Thursday's Child Has Far To Go*,

> and during a long afternoon walk, spotted on the horizon a solitary wanderer. As he came nearer I saw that he was an acquaintance whom I had not seen for years. I have met friends and relations in some very unlikely places. But in Breslau, the city of my birth—where I had once been surrounded by a fairly large family and many acquaintances … there was not a single soul known to me [when I later returned]. … The world I had known as a boy no longer existed, and as I tried to remember the people I had known when I was sixteen, I realized that most of them had died a violent death. Some were killed in the ruins of Stalingrad, others in Auschwitz, some in 1948 in the battles for Palestine.[6]

Through the generosity of an uncle, who sponsored him as a student intent on pursuing a career in medicine at the then-newly founded Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Walter made his way alone as a seventeen-year-old to British-ruled Palestine. He thereby avoided the horrific fate that befell his parents and the six million other Jews who perished during the Holocaust. Once in Palestine, Walter instead preferred the life of an agricultural laborer at a rural kibbutz (farming collective) to university study. He was a mounted auxiliary policeman for a time before finding his métier in 1944 as a journalist.

Walter remarkably seemed always to be at the center of the defining events of his time. The tearful farewell he bade his parents at the Breslau rail station eighty years ago was emblematic of the fate of thousands of other young German-Jewish children for whom survival meant leaving parents most would never see again. Walter subsequently wrote about this unique generation in his book, *Generation Exodus*.[7] He was a street away from Jerusalem's King David Hotel when the *Irgun Zvai Le'umi* (National Military Organization,) commanded by a future Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, famously blew it up in July 1946, killing ninety-one persons.

A few years later, Walter was among the few outsiders allowed to travel to the Soviet Union and moreover to remote corners of the Caucasus. He taught at Harvard where luminaries such as Henry Kissinger, Stanley Hoffmann, and Zbigniew Brzezinski were his colleagues. Walter's life-long friends from their childhood in Breslau were the fellow distinguished historians Abraham Ascher and Guenter Lewey. Walter became the director of both the Wiener Library and the Institute of Contemporary History in London where together with another German-Jewish émigré, George Mosse, he founded and was coeditor of the *Journal of Contemporary History*. Walter was also the founding editor of *Survey*, an important Cold War–era journal focusing on the Soviet Union.

But for half his remarkable life, Walter lived in Washington, D.C. He joined what was then the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies (now CSIS) and eventually became the chairman of its International Research Council. Walter was also appointed university professor at Georgetown in 1976, where he taught until his retirement in 1988—thus accounting for the longest continuous academic appointment Walter held. He was very proud to have taught one of the first undergraduate courses on terrorism anywhere.

Walter was a typical Washingtonian. A polymath born elsewhere, who wandered far and wide and had lived in a variety of places before settling permanently here. He had the restless, probing, and inquisitive mind one encounters among that city's smartest denizens. In Walter, equal parts skepticism and wonderment made him the most appealing of interlocuters, dinner guests, and friends. Walter derived his greatest

satisfaction from the many interactions and close relationships that he hugely enjoyed with persons decades younger than him. These continued right up until his death. A retinue of young research assistants faithfully arrived at his apartment daily—in more recent years as scribes and collaborators because Walter's declining health prevented him from sitting at a desk and eventually typing on a keyboard.

Writing was indeed as intrinsic to Walter's existence as breathing. When he fell yet more ill two years before his passing, Walter told me that as long he could write, craft commentary, review books, and transform research into prose he felt productive and therefore able to stave off any depression about his condition and even death. Perhaps because he grew up in a place at a time when free and open expression was cruelly suppressed, where books were routinely banned and burned, and any voicing of truth or demands for justice were silenced, Walter retained a life-long commitment to democracy and Western liberal values as well as to communicating his thoughts and knowledge to vast audiences, whether in books, newspaper columns, op-eds, book reviews, or both long- and short-form journalism.

Walter was an immensely generous and kind friend, mentor, and teacher to generations of students, scholars, policymakers, diplomats, and countless others. This journal had celebrated Walter's many contributions to terrorism studies seven years ago on the occasion of his 90th birthday. That tribute from the 2011 volume can be found at the journal's website.[8] His death is a loss of truly incomprehensible dimensions. "A great man," a friend wrote to me to express his sadness at Walter's passing. "We could use his mind now more than ever."

Bruce Hoffman
October 2018

Notes

1. Walter Laqueur, *Reflections of a Veteran Pessimist: Contemplating Modern Europe, Russia, and Jewish History* (New York: Transaction, 2017), viii-ix.
2. Walter Laqueur and Christopher Wall, *The Future of Terrorism: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Alt-Right* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2018).
3. Walter Laqueur, *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), ix and xvi.
4. Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and Its Future with the West* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2015).
5. See, for instance, Peter Baker, "Books Of The Times—Review: Walter Laqueur's 'Putinism' Dissects a Canny Russian Leader," *New York Times*, 20 July 2015.
6. Walter Laqueur, *Thursday's Child Has Far to Go: A Memoir of the Journeying Years* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), xi–xii.
7. Walter Laqueur, *Generation Exodus: The Fate Of Young Jewish Refugees From Nazi Germany* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001).
8. Bruce Hoffman, "In Celebration of Walter Laqueur's Birthday: Reflections on His Contributions to the Study of Terrorism and Guerrilla Warfare," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 34, no. 9 (September 2011), 667-671. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2011.594942.