

## Bernard Lewis: Appreciating a Scholar of Consequence

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Brief Analysis

### Three distinguished experts and former students of the late scholar share their memories of his life and research.

*When he passed away in May, just twelve days shy of his 102nd birthday, Bernard Lewis—the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton and inaugural recipient of The Washington Institute's Scholar-Statesman Award—left behind a legacy of unparalleled scholarly consequence that crossed disciplines, centuries, continents, governments, and generations. To discuss his influence on the study, politics, and policy of the Middle East, the Institute hosted a forum with three of his former students: Martin Kramer, the Institute's Koret Visiting Fellow and founding president of Shalem College in Jerusalem, Katherine Nouri Hughes, author of the highly acclaimed historical novel *The Mapmaker's Daughter*, and Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. The following are prepared remarks by Kramer and Hughes; Doran's remarks are available in the above video.*

## MARTIN KRAMER

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, PhD 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. Who would have imagined that five years later, he'd have two *New York Times* bestsellers and have become 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's not why he refused to surrender to old age. He came up for another round, 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. I'd like to devote the few minutes I have to Lewis in World War II, the Cold War, and what I'll call, after one of his book titles, the Crisis of Islam. Three wars that constituted for him a continuum.

In 2006, Lewis, then ninety, told an interviewer this: "The most vividly remembered year of my life was the year 1940." 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." Lewis was twenty-three years old, already regarded as a prodigy, indeed, a genius. One of the last things he did before his mobilization was to rush his doctoral thesis into print. It was published in London in 1940. 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. He described his task there as "translating texts, mostly from Arabic...For much of the time it was just a desk job." 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."

As it happened, this was far more dangerous than any place in the Middle East. Some 43,000 civilians perished in the Blitz. In terms of deaths, that comes to almost two 9/11's a month for eight months of almost ceaseless bombing. And yet civilian morale held, and Lewis was a case in point. In his memoirs, he recalled that at first, he took shelter in Tube 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." 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, 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." But the 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." It dwells not on victory, but on its terrible cost. I quote from the opening:

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 think 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." 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."

That was Lewis too. He would be ever vigilant in his defense of liberal democracy, lest it ever be threatened with extinction again. Nor could he forget that in freedom's most imperiled and "finest hour," many Arabs had sided with the enemy. After all, he'd spent the war translating evidence of their collaboration.

The World War was followed by the Cold War. For Lewis's generation, this gave rise to some ambivalence. He once described his own early approach to history as "quasi-Marxist." 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 therefore perhaps able to understand something of the attraction as well as of the repulsion of the Communist creed." 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."

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, the World War 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." "In the fifties," he later said of the early Cold War, "the choices before us still retained something of the clarity, even the starkness, which they had through the war years."

In this struggle, there was no guarantee of victory. "I am by no means certain," he wrote in the 1950s, "that [democracy] represents the common destiny of mankind." 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." 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 this country, 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.

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. 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.

But there's a vast misunderstanding of how Lewis conceived this war. It can be attributed to Sam Huntington. When Huntington came up with his "clash of civilizations," he credited Lewis with first use of the phrase. Technically, this was correct—Lewis coined it as early as the 1950s, to describe the history of conflict between Islam and Christendom.

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" (of civilizations) with "encounter." So it's unfortunate that so many obituaries focused on Lewis as the source of Huntington's concept, because he wasn't.

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." Lewis believed Islamism and extremes of Arabism were implacable foes of freedom and democracy. But he thought that Islam, the faith, 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, and I quote him, "it *is* different today...we don't know the issues, and we still do not understand the nature of the enemy." 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."

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're the established ways of humankind. In the World War 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've 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'd devoted his scholarly life. He thought he glimpsed its beginnings in Iraq. In 2008, when everyone had gone sour on the country, he said, "Iraq 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."

Call it 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."

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

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## KATHERINE NOURI HUGHES

**B**ernard Lewis had a greater impact on my life than anyone outside my immediate family. He was illumination. He was as warm as he was brilliant. He starred—as my teacher and my friend.

Bernard was my professor at Princeton. And he became my mentor, too. But not within the walls of the university. I wasn't that kind of student. He wasn't that kind of mentor.

In his graduate seminar on *dhimmi*—non-Muslims specially protected and taxed in Islamic lands—Bernard spotted me quickly as someone on a not-long scholarly path. My interests were strictly horizontal, and Bernard did me the favor and honor of taking that seriously. “Being an amateur—even a dilettante,” he said, “was respectable. What possible fault is there in loving and delighting in what you engage in? There is something, however, that you must beware of.” He specified by citing Milton: “that one talent which is death to hide...lodged with me useless.” It was something he repeated many times in the seasons that followed.

I started college late—at twenty-seven—and finished my master's in 1984. For those years, and for many after, I was unmarried, raising my children, and it was in that long period that Bernard became my most trusted friend.

When you sit down weekly, for years, to figure out offspring and wars, junk bonds and popes, annoying friends and promising partners—and here I wish to expressly acknowledge Bernard's loving other half, Buntzie Churchill—the friendship that develops is solid as rock. And—it yields. The more you reveal, the less you need to say. The less said, the more you dare to reveal. The result is trust. This dynamic is true of friendship generally, I think. But when the friend is Bernard—and it is hard to keep to the past tense—a person of such concern and kindness, the nature of the trust is hard to describe. Security with wings is about the best I can do.

More than a few times over the years—especially when he was extricating me from some psychic jam—imagined or real—I remarked to Bernard that he was the least neurotic person I had ever known. The accuracy of that assessment was borne out by his having no clue what I meant.

About Bernard's stature and awe-inducing affect: like all his other qualities it was for real—meaning he couldn't have helped it if he'd wished to or tried. His gifts were so massive and various and conveyed in a syntax and voice of such grandeur that it could add up to something unnerving. Michael and Martin will remember, I'm sure, brown bag lunches in the days Bernard was anchoring the long table in Jones Hall. That's when you were sure that the less the guest speaker said the more likely you were to hear something dazzlingly recondite and terrifyingly clever.

Bernard was a showman. No one knew better than he the scope and surprise of what he could summon on the spur of the moment. And if you didn't happen to agree with every premise or point, of course, he reveled all the more. Who will forget the MESA debate with Edward Said assisted by Christopher Hitchens, and Bernard by Leon Wieseltier. It was a draw only in the massive audience it attracted. Bernard towered.

Two expressions of Bernard's friendship had an especially big effect on me. The first was his robust approval of the man I would marry. The other was identifying and locating me in the realm where I belonged—intellectually and creatively.

He introduced the idea in 1997. “There is a book to be written,” Bernard said. “About one of the most influential women in the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Venetian by birth. Captured at twelve by Barbarossa. Put into the harem and assigned to the son of Suleiman who succeeded him. Her name was Nurbanu. Same as yours,” Bernard said, looking over his glasses, “and YOU should write her story. As fiction.”

I pointed out that I'd never written fiction. He said that didn't matter. I added that I'd never written history. He said that didn't matter either. And then he said something really stunning: that we would write the book together. And when I asked how that would work, all he said was, “Trust me.” And, of course I did.

Years before, Bernard had written a few very brief impressions relevant to what Nurbanu's story might entail—visitors to the seraglio...eunuch habits...execution techniques. They are laced with his no-frills wit. Here is an example: “By ancient Ottoman rule, when a new sultan succeeded to the throne his brothers were put to death to avoid wars of succession. The deaf mutes were used for this task as well as for the removal of other persons whose continued existence was deemed unnecessary or dangerous. Members of the imperial house were strangled with a silken bowstring to avoid the impiety of shedding imperial blood. Erring or unnecessary concubines were tied in sacks and thrown into Marmara.”

He intended for this story to be written. For two years all I did was read—every book and monograph on Bernard's syllabus and shelves. For most of a third year all I did was travel. In 2001, I gave Bernard the first draft, 500 pages. Without looking at it, he said, “Good. Now write the next one.”

When I asked about his “part” was when he let me know that I was going to write this book myself. He was launching me, of course, and he had been all along, but that didn't

mean I wasn't very thrown by this turn. In the more than three years when I thought Bernard and I were—in a way I had yet to find out—doing this together, nothing about the book seemed a challenge. On my own it was a different story—in every sense.

Finding the crux to an historical novel is a lot harder than I had imagined. When I finally did find it, Bernard endorsed the idea heartily, and within days I was, yet again, on a plane to Istanbul to see the world's expert on the subject.

The Istanbul Observatory was demolished three years after it went up in 1577. No one anywhere knows more about it than Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, who—before running against President Erdogan in 2014—was the founding chair of the History of Science Department at Istanbul University. At the end of a full and unforgettable day on his campus what he left me with was pure gold:

“No one can say for sure who destroyed the Observatory. Or why,” he said.

“Meaning I can make it up?”

“Meaning you can make it up.”

This is the kind of thing Bernard made happen. All the time. For history and fiction. Creating this kind of mind-bending opening to whole new ways of thinking and imagining while giving unswerving support week in and week out—which in the case of my book stretched to twenty years.

Bernard's light will never not surround us. This gathering is a perfect example: individuals whose lives and minds have been changed by Bernard's power to enlighten and to cause us, each in our way, to do something similar.

Till recently, it was understood that light moved in straight lines. Today physicists “know” what students of Bernard have known for three quarters of a century. Light bends. From Bernard to us to our varied and fruitful understandings of the world.

Bernard. A pilot light. Our ignition. Our guide.

Thank you. ❖

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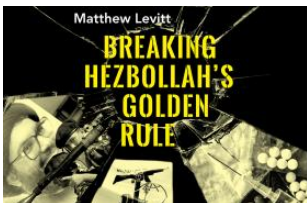
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