

Thoughts on the Zombie Apocalypse

We live in uncertain times. As of this writing, the U.S. stock market has taken two consecutive days of beating, losing nearly 5% of its value. The conspiracy theorists came out to claim that China was mounting an attack on the financial system, and that America was on the verge of economic collapse. China and Russia conducted joint military exercises, and are both engaged in active territorial contention outside their borders. North Korea is on its highest state of alert and military readiness in years, helmed by an unpredictable madman. The middle east is burning more intensely than at any point in the last century. It's little wonder, then, that one of the most popular and enduring narratives is that of the post-apocalyptic wilderness. Among those post-apocalyptic narratives, none has proven more successful or enduring as that of the zombie apocalypse.



He had fun before he was turned, and then someone got to shoot a soldier without feeling bad about it!

This type of story, about individuals surviving in the herd, is a sort of meditation about what can happen when systems fail, and, in order to survive, the individual is suddenly compelled to act violently and cynically without any moral boundaries. Guns are important, as is a very limited, teamwork based on an equal mixture of tribalism and proto-democracy. In other words, it's a specifically *American* fantasy, designed for an American audience. Key to maintaining the illusion of zombie apocalypse fantasies being relevant or interesting

(rather than stupid and facile, as they are) is that one ignores this basic fact of its *American-ness*.

Witness [the recent *Foreign Policy* piece](#) that pretended to investigate whether countries would withstand the zombie apocalypse well or poorly, and concluded that the country best suited for this was Russia. The evaluation made some basic assumptions about the nature of the zombie problem, and about how governments and cultures would be suitable (or not) to responding. It privileged authoritarian governments that have supposedly-swift decision-making capabilities, and placed bureaucratic (and therefore democratic) governments at a disadvantage. It also assumed that countries with larger, urban populations would be vulnerable to zombie hordes, as would countries with sophisticated infrastructure. Stepping back, *Foreign Policy's* take on the zombie apocalypse looks a lot like a medical researcher's evaluation of a pandemic. This is the only way to justify the otherwise strange and insupportable conclusion that *Russia* is best positioned to support a major challenge to its social and political structures.

It's possible that Russia would be well suited to dealing with an epidemic – the populations are spread out, infrastructure is not developed, and (as pointed out) it's simple to make decisions at the top and expect them to be obeyed at lower levels. But zombies aren't a conventional disease – you can't kill a disease with guns or machetes, because disease is bacterial or viral and remain active after their hosts die. And one of the key components of any discussion of zombies is that these are human-like creatures that can be stopped by severing the brain's connection to the rest of the body. Why is this important? Because if a disease can be killed like a human, by conventional weapons designed to kill humans, then certain countries and cultures will have an innate advantage – those that glorify and glamorize weapon use and violence, and those with heavily-armed populations.

On the other hand, historically, the populations least capable of reacting to crisis have been led authoritarian regimes, not the other way around. Authoritarian or totalitarian countries are filled with cowed and timorous populations who've been acclimatized to wait for guidance and official instruction. Populations in authoritarian countries tend to view violence skeptically or even with open hatred; the one thing authoritarian regimes depend on is an actual monopoly on state-controlled violence, and usually have few qualms about dispensing it. Hitler and Stalin, the archetypical 20th-century totalitarian/authoritarian dictators (the conflation is broad but useful for these purposes) proved very poor at handling crises, and their countries both suffered as a result, the latter's Soviet Union nearly collapsing due to bad decision-making apparatus, and the former's Nazi Germany being utterly destroyed by the Allies in World War II in large part due to the same flawed decision-making institutions.

Democratic countries, on the other hand, have populations accustomed to making decisions for themselves, and exercising choice and opinion (even when those choices are fairly limited, as in America). Democratic countries would be filled (at least in the beginning) with many non-zombie people who were capable of resisting in a way that their authoritarian / totalitarian cousins would not. In other words, countries with authoritarian populations and cultures, as well as those where weapons were not readily available to everyone (authoritarian governments tend not to allow heavily-armed populations as a rule) would be very disadvantaged.

While bureaucracy-heavy and democratic governments tend to move more deliberately than authoritarian countries, they do not blunder in times of catastrophe or crisis. In fact, their true power comes from well-educated and agential populations. The focus on how effective a country would be at surviving a zombie trauma then depends not on its' government's response,

but how its people responded after government becomes overwhelmed (as it is inevitably in this type of situation). In the case of America, it's not difficult to imagine a swift that without a credible, robust central government, the country would devolve into regions, and then states, and so on, down to individuals. At each level, however, there would be action and response, a check against chaos and entropy.

In a place like Russia, governors are little better than representatives of their central government, and would be asking that central government for help and guidance. America and similar Western governments have more room for non-reactionary, positivist individual initiative and choice. This makes them far more resilient in a real way.

Population centers and urban areas are hallmarks of a developed country no longer fully reliant on agriculture – and they would be vulnerable to zombies, especially when one considers that urban populations tend to be demilitarized and conform to liberal stereotypes like pacifism and a reduced affection for guns and violence. This would seem like the ideal place for zombies to be successful. Nevertheless, there's an important component that analysts seem to overlook here, which is that massive population centers can be easily quarantined or destroyed if necessary. I'm talking, of course, about nuclear weapons. For those who are not read up on the basic capabilities of nuclear ordnance, suffice it to say that a single garden-variety strategic nuke would be sufficient to destroy all combustible biological matter on the island of Manhattan. The places where the most zombie damage can occur is also the place where it's easiest to eradicate severe outbreaks.

Urban areas are good things for humanity, then, as ways to concentrate risk – but also further underline the fragility of authoritarian organizations like China and Russia, where the entire state is concentrated in those places that are most vulnerable to zombies. America could lose Washington D.C. and

NYC, LA and San Francisco, and “America” would survive quite well – similarly, Germany without Berlin is still recognizably Germany. Russia without Moscow and St. Petersburg is – well, it’s a collection of people who speak the same primary or secondary language with varying degrees of fluency.

The points about culture and language and where and what makes a person American versus, say, Russian are important, because, the “zombie apocalypse” has always been a metaphor for how an *idea* can spread and wipe out opponents. The first *Night of the Living Dead* is a meditation on how communism works, while later sequels interrogate ideas like corporate consumerism. The zombie apocalypse isn’t really about the end of the world – it’s an eschatological shift, the end of a way of thinking about things. The nuclear family, hetero-normative social structures, science-based empiricism, sex- and gender-based standards for certain types of military service, the glorification of technology in peoples’ personal lives.

And it’s no surprise, then, that upon closer examination – examination of who would win in the zombie apocalypse (heavily-armed democratic individualists predisposed to articulating a vision of the world that depends on the purifying and redemptive power of violence) and who would certainly lose in the zombie apocalypse (everyone else for various reasons) – the zombie apocalypse ends up being a quintessentially American story, set in places and situations where American strengths are privileged. America has witnessed successful movies, a popular television franchise, books, and many thought-pieces on the subject, including this one. It all ends up coming down to the same thing: deprived of *actual* deprivation like that experienced casually by much of the developing world, Americans are hungry to be used for the ends to which they’ve been conditioned and raised. They are, to a far greater extent than other countries, prepared to encounter the zombie apocalypse – in spirit, if not in reality.

A final irony worth mentioning is that zombie apocalypse films

were originally created for an outlier audience – they were considered outré films, about how to resist mob mentality (as stated earlier, associated first with communism and later with consumerism and capitalism). Now, zombie fantasies have been commercialized for the mainstream. Dissent has become fad, revolution is an aesthetic in which one indulges on Sunday evenings.

As genuine intellectual inquiry, the zombie apocalypse does not hold up to scrutiny – it's an interesting thought, and amusing at first, but once one realizes that it is a meditation designed for Americans, and one where the game is rigged, it's difficult to stay interested. America would win in a zombie apocalypse, but America would win most games of violence it designs for itself. It's what America does.