

In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first “post-modern” wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for

individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support “pre-emptive strikes” still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan’s sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush’s U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin’s Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community’s long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), “Generation War” follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to “Our Fathers, Our Mothers.” It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn’t fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany's "Band of Brothers" is a dark anti-Epic that follows the birth of modern Germany through the struggle of those citizens who were of fighting age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as "camp guards." But this isn't a Ukrainian version of WWII—it's *German*. Didn't Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there's always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear

against the series. Watching *Generation War* it's not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there's always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it's either his job, or he's a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren't clean, either, regardless of Poland's experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18th century might return as a Russian during the season that deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.