Dunkirk: the Bravest British Retreat

Whatever one might think about the United Kingdom's recent behavior toward Europe—its antagonism toward the European Union, willingness to undermine international markets, and everlasting search for the best possible deal—you can't say it didn't help beat the Nazis. Regardless of their unwillingness to participate in the collective European post-war experiment, you can't say the UK didn't help rescue Europe from the night of Nazi totalitarianism. That the UK didn't stand for European values in Europe's darkest hour.

An upcoming movie, "Dunkirk," might change that. "Dunkirk," which appears to be a movie about the fear of death, seeks to reevaluate the UK's role in WWII, as well as its role in European affairs. In the current context. It's possible that "Dunkirk" will cause audiences to question whether the UK is capable of long-term alliance or partnership when its interests aren't at stake.

Most WWII movies confirm what people already know about WWII—who was good, who was bad, and why it was important to fight. The ideological stakes were unusually clear during WWII and it makes for a great dramatic setting. Few WWII movies communicate any urgent questions about life (a phenomenon [called kitsch](#) by some [on this site](#)). Instead, WWII becomes a superficial and emotionally vapid garden of thematic consistency, a circus freak-show of predictable actions and reactions. See! Conspicuous bad guys (the Nazis). Marvel! At clear-cut good guys (as told here, the British, the Americans). Cry! For hapless allies in need of rescue (the [French](#) and the [poor Jewish folk](#) in the Holocaust). Laugh! At dopey enemies who are easily dispatched (the Italians and, paradoxically, the Germans). At the end of the exhibit, a happy ending.

Whenever an established filmmaker decides to tackle an unheroic corner of the war, they take a big risk. Awkward stories don't fit with audience sensibilities, especially when it comes to WWII. Two of the best WWII movies—*[The Thin Red Line](#)* directed by Terrence Malick, and *[Cross of Iron](#)* directed by Sam Peckinpah—represented big gambles, which impacted both directors in the short term. These movies take unusually honest looks at war, without glamorizing it. Both movies encountered skeptical or hostile critics and audiences when they were released.

Now, the Christopher Nolan who directed Batman has undertaken to tell the story of the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) retreat from France. From the West's perspective, this was one of the most significant actions of the war, and basically guaranteed a Nazi victory when the outcome of the struggle was still very much in doubt. Rather than stay and fight as they had in WWI, pinning down the German flank and giving the French Army time to regroup while landing reinforcements further down the coast, the BEF fled, and essentially doomed the French and continental Europe to four years of Nazi occupation, as well as the Holocaust. Adding insult to injury, barely a month later the Royal Navy [bushwacked and sank great portions of the French fleet](#) in North Africa without provocation or warning.

THE HISTORICAL EVENT OF DUNKIRK IS EMBARRASSING

To say that Dunkirk was an embarrassment would be an understatement. By any honest measure of evaluation, Dunkirk was a catastrophe. In other areas, the British fought doggedly to protect their Imperial interests, dedicating extraordinary resources to defend Egypt, Africa, and India. Where France was concerned, though, Great Britain was just as happy to watch its economic and colonial rival burn.

This is not to suggest that there was a British conspiracy to lose France—they committed significant soldiers to keeping the Germans out, and were legitimately hoping to avoid strategic defeat in Europe. This is only to point out that where Britain dedicated itself to fighting Nazi Germany, it did not lose (Egypt, England, India)—and places it saw as expendable (France, Norway, Greece) or where racism was involved (anywhere facing the Japanese), it did. The battle of Dunkirk is filled with incidents of apathy and inattention, missed opportunities, inaction, and half-hearted effort. The only time British officers dedicated their unmitigated attention during Dunkirk was when it came to loading their boats as quickly as possible to return to Great Britain. Had they applied a quarter of the energy expended in leaving France to staying there, it's entirely possible that World War II could have turned out differently. The French might have had time to rally, as they had in WWI. The Italians might have thought twice about entering the war on the side of Hitler (unknown to many, Mussolini did not actually commit to the Axis cause as a belligerent until 10 June, after the British flight from France).

Many, many things could have turned out differently—had the British not decided (after a week of skirmishing) that it wasn't worth defending France. Granted, this is counterfactual history (which in clumsy hands can be worse than useless), but Hitler did not cancel the invasion of Great Britain because of the British Army—they had left most of their equipment in Normandy and were viewed as already defeated. It was cancelled because the Luftwaffe and the Kreigsmarine were unable to secure a crossing of the English Channel. Had the BEF been defeated (worst case scenario), the Nazis could not have invaded the UK.

Of course, that's not how the narrative goes. The way most people read history is that the British barely avoided total destruction at the hands of the Germans—that the German victory was inevitable, so they had to run away. In this context, the retreat was not a disaster, but some kind of miraculous victory. Viewed in its appropriate context, however, the Battle of Dunkirk reads as the version of Monty Python's Holy Grail where [Brave Sir Robin](#) was the only one who survived to tell his version of the encounter with the confused three-headed ogre.

But everyone knows that [our grandfathers weren't pussies](#). Unlike the current generation of me-first baby-boomer handout-for-free wantniks, our grandfathers were honorable and hard as nails. The ultimate proof of this, beyond teary stories of sandwiches earned by chopping wood, is how they comported themselves in WWII. Our grandfathers, you see—British and American—beat the Nazis. It was the least morally ambiguous war we'd ever seen, and the hardest war, and they were lucky to get to fight in it, and every vet since—from Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan—understands that we owe an unpayable debt to those great, titanic figures looming over our shoulders. And the retreat from Dunkirk is part of that exciting, dramatic story.

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN DOES WELL WITH MORAL COMPLEXITY

Christopher Nolan's success as the director of the Batman

trilogy should not be understated. The Dark Knight is worth watching and rewatching, filled with interesting and well-presented individual and philosophical clashes. And while Batman: The Dark Knight Rises veers into parody, it is still far superior to most of the other superhero offerings of today—it is not superficial in places where the Spider Man franchise has always bowed to temptation, it is not wanton or spuriously violent where Marvel's Iron Man and Avengers franchises embrace violence as a justifiable means to an end. Nolan may or may not be consciously aware the Hegelian dialectic, inevitable conflict between ideas, and the ways in which competing ideologies twin and intersect and [depend on each other for definitional integrity](#) but he espouses those themes with admirable consistency. If you're going to make a serious movie about serious heroes, Nolan's the person to do it. His Batman villains were tasteful and appropriate as these things go (Raz-Al-Gul, The Joker, Two-Face, Bane). The heroes were complex and accessible. This is likely true in part because Nolan's world is a human world, not supernatural—episodes have logical (if unexpected) explanations. The enemy is not a [silly robot](#) or a [magic alien](#)—the enemy is us, an exaggerated, intentionally distorted vision of our potential for causing harm to each other, for making mischief on a grand scale.

Hence Nolan's unique suitability to direct a great WWII movie. The way we read about it in the history books, WWII is basically a superhero fairy tale, starring knowable humans in the heroic roles, and engagingly inscrutable humans as the villains. Our grandfathers don't (or didn't if, like mine, they're dead) talk about what they did, except when they get drunk, and then the stories are a mixture of horrifying and pathetic, comical. In graphic novels and movies, though, as I mentioned earlier, WWII is a morality tale—the good, handsome officer. The loyal sergeant. The conflicted soldier. The bad officer. And—of course—the strong and untrustworthy SS guy to be defeated at any cost. Even—especially—if it means [turning](#)

[into the SS guy](#). That's the lesson we learn from WWII movies. Weakness is bad. Killing is necessary. Necessary is good. An elliptical but pleasant logic that generates the same satisfaction in English and in Russian.

There's another level to Dunkirk, and it's worth mentioning, because stories go deep when one pulls back the curtains of history. All the significant British and German leadership had direct experience with World War I, and were responding in various ways to that war. The Germans and British leading the fight in and around Dunkirk all recalled what had happened the last time their armies had thrust and parried in a total blind as to what was going on. Both sides had come of age during the age of trench warfare. Both craved certainty, needed to understand their lines—the destruction of which on both sides (deliberate on the part of the German blitzkrieg, unintentional on the part of the Allies) had resulted in an unseen opportunities and great anxiety. In that chaotic tempest, the British and Germans lost their nerve at the same time, in different ways. When the French line collapsed and the German armor started rolling south, flanks exposed, the British leadership continued to decide against an unequivocal and powerful counterattack (which might have defeated Nazi Germany or at least given the beleaguered French a chance to catch their breath) until flight by sea was the only option left. And the Germans chose to allow the Luftwaffe an attempt to destroy the British (not the last time a military would [hopefully but unwisely and unsuccessfully](#) entrust operational[victory to its Air Force](#)). Both militaries were led by veterans of World War I. Neither were willing to risk everything against one another. Into this decisional vacuum, the British High Command chose flight.

It was possible to [accurately and correctly review Fury](#) from its original[two-and-a-half minute preview](#), but Dunkirk's preview lasts [one minute and seven seconds](#) and involves precious little to evaluate save Nolan's deft use of sound and

physical gestures to convey dread. It doesn't look bad. In another director's hands, I'd worry that the movie would retread tired tropes like Allied heroism (rather than cowardice) in the face of inevitable Nazi victory and thousands of Nazis killed while stalwart British defenders did their duty. I'd be waiting for that inevitable exemplar, a brave NCO expiring on his dead crew's hot machine gun having single-handedly saved the British Empire. Knowing Nolan's accomplishments, I'm hopeful that he's going to pull a Peckinpah or Malick instead. Contrary to popular belief, humans don't need unrealistic and ahistorical monuments to psychotic excess—no, humans seem constantly in want of reminding that actions have consequences. The consequences of Dunkirk were simple: France was destroyed, and the Jews annihilated.

EMPIRES ALWAYS FALL

Then, within fifteen years, Great Britain's empire collapsed anyway. And no matter how much the current British would like to deny it—their history, the world's history—abandoning one's allies leads to horror, death, and bloodshed. The USA (mostly) the USSR (some) and China (a little) stepped into the vacuum created when colonialism collapsed, while those nations freed from Great Britain attempted to make their way in the world despite having been intentionally and systematically hobbled. Many of those countries—hundreds of millions of people—suffered through savage, bloody wars of independence, accustomed as they were to the implicit and direct threat of violence behind British rule. One British retreat occasioned its most spectacular retreat of all—that which left the United Kingdom a sliver of its former self, and its citizens pining for independence from Europe.

Whatever direction we learn Nolan decided to take Dunkirk—kitschy, hackneyed morality tale or counterintuitive evaluation of a desperate and rather despicable (again, talking about the UK here) Empire on decline, it deserves a well-educated evaluation. The UK—or Great Britain—or England—whatever it's called—has a long history of interfering with European affairs to its advantage when that interference is unnecessary, counterproductive, or self-interested (Hundred Years War, WWI), then taking off when it's needed most (Dunkirk, Brexit). This movie is an excellent reminder of that pattern, at a time when we're watching it unfold again in real time.

Curzio Malaparte: Great & Anonymous WWII Writer

How World War II gets remembered isn't accurate, and for Curzio Malaparte, it's not even true. Not the American version, not the Russian, not anywhere, really. At best, our memory of WWII has become a lie founded on emotional connections to people barely known in life. A series of well-intentioned miscommunications and words spoken (or not) in German, Italian, Russian, Japanese or English across untranslatable generational gaps. The product of the optimistic if misplaced belief that one human could ever be said to understand another without dreaming some part of one's own self and aspirations into them. Less good, our memory of WWII is a thoughtless generalization, and ultimately, a stand-in for racism, nationalism, and all the worst stereotypes that made anyone feel good about going to the War in the first place. Worst case scenario, it's a deliberate deception — the product of malicious individuals or concerns eager to portray

the narrative in ways that advantage themselves and their interests.

In the version of WWII I grew up with — the one popular here in America — here's how it happened. This comes from my grandfathers, one of whom was an enlisted man in Europe with the U.S. Army, and the other of whom was in the U.S. Army Air Corps, an officer (Lieutenant) in a B-24 Liberator. Nazi Germany declared war on Europe and beat them, save for Italy, which was Germany's comically inept ally that was good mostly for humorous tension-relief. Then they turned on their sort-of-ally (more like Frenemy), the Soviet Union. Germany and the Soviet Union were slugging it out, and England was on the ropes, when in jumped America. D-Day, Battle of the Bulge, game over — America: 1, Nazi Germany: 0. The Soviet Union wanted Europe for themselves, but America said, "nope, not gonna happen fellas, hang on while we beat Japan with our other hand," then we got the atomic bomb. Communists and peaceniks stole our secrets and sold them to the Soviets because they hated America, and the rest is history. Bottom line: Britain? Weak. France? Super weak. Italy? Worse than France! Japan? Sneaky, mostly. Russia? Strong, but sneaky. Germany? Strong, but not as strong as America!

And America? Strongest of all. Just, and right, and boy did we take it to the Germans.

One of the other editors of this intellectual initiative, Mr. Carson, gave me a book for Christmas: *Kaputt*, by Curzio Malaparte, *nee* Kurt Erich Suckert, a northern Italian. While as a "memoir" it falls under biography / autobiography, it's the sort of memoir that can only be produced during a time of catastrophe. *Kaputt* describes Malaparte's time as an Italian Army officer / journalist on the Eastern Front — an absurd account of the violence that is so far as I can tell, both largely inaccurate and unique. Malaparte visits Romania, Ukraine, Poland and Finland and through almost-unbelievable access, bears witness to the horrors of war and governance of

the Nazis. That in and of itself is remarkable, because access breeds familiarity, but in this case, it grants the author (and the reader) a perspective on the occupiers that is simultaneously individual and universal. Witness the scene (one of many) with [Hans Frank, the Nazi Governor-General of Poland](), when Frank attempts to convince Malaparte that the Axis mission is just by invoking his wife and her friends knitting in their parlor:

Frank's hand on my shoulder, though it was not heavy, oppressed me. Little by little, disentangling and considering each feeling that Frank aroused in me and attempting to understand and define the meaning, the pretexts and the reason for his every word and gesture, and trying to piece together a moral portrait of him out of the scraps that I had picked up about his character in the past few days, I became convinced that he was not to be judged summarily.

The uneasiness that I felt within me in his presence was born precisely because of the complexity of his character — a peculiar mixture of cruel intelligence, refinement, vulgarity, brutal cynicism and polished sensitiveness. There had to be a deep zone of darkness within him that I was still unable to explore — a dark region, an inaccessible hell from which dull, fleeting glows flashed unexpectedly, lighting his forbidding face — that disturbing and fascinating mysterious face.

The opinion I had formed of Frank long ago was, unquestionably, negative. I knew enough of him to detest him, but I felt honor-bound not to stop there. Of all the elements that I was conscious of in Frank, some a result of the experience of others and some of my own, something, I could not say what, was lacking — something the very nature of which was not known to me but which I expected would suddenly be revealed to me at any moment.

I hoped to catch a gesture, a word, an involuntary action that might reveal to me Frank's real face, his inner face, that

would suddenly break away from the dark, deep region of his mind where, I instinctively felt, the roots of his cruel intelligence and musical sensitiveness were anchored in a morbid and, in a certain sense, criminal subsoil of character.

"This is Poland — an honest German home," repeated Frank, embracing in a single glance that middle-class scene of domestic simplicity.

Readers receive the usual evaluation of a prominent Nazi leader — that of the thug, the brute — but that is only the jumping-off point for a more careful and scathing indictment, which is to say, the suggestion that the thing that makes Nazi Germany spectacular and special is its specifically middle-class sensibility. In other words — to the British, German, or American reader — the Nazis are like us.

It's an astonishing book by an extraordinary man, who has been largely ignored by American history, likely for the reason stated above. Malaparte seems to have gotten a bad reputation for his involvement in the Italian fascist party, and, as a human, seems also to have been both a fanatical social climber, as well as a flamboyant intellectual. For all his political and moral failings, though, it's important to recognize that he spent 5 years in exile for publishing defamatory remarks public statements about Mussolini and Hitler, then was imprisoned for similar anti-fascist/Nazi activity in 1938, 39, 41, and 43. He was a valorously decorated combat veteran of World War I, which means something, especially considering his service with Italy's premiere infantry unit of the time, the Alpini.

Kaputt details the final destruction of a dying world order. We remember World War I as having swept away much of Europe's prevailing social climate, and shows like Downton Abbey catalogue how that played out in Great Britain. There's some truth to that recollection of history — the aftermath of WWI saw the beginning of Soviet (not Communist) Russia, and there

were greater "rights" enunciated to women, as well as expanded economic opportunities for the lower and middle-class in non-communist societies (mostly through human space created by war casualties and the Spanish Influenza rather than human altruism) — but the events that were set in motion during World War I accelerated after the fall of Tsarist Russia and the ascension of the Soviet Union. By the time the Nazis swept into power and through Poland and France, the old social order had been almost entirely eviscerated. Malaparte bears witness to this destruction on landscapes that are unfamiliar to most Western readers, and many Eastern European readers as well. *Kaputt* is full of surreal images of the horrors of war — it is a read unlike anything else one will encounter on the subject of World War II. Two quick examples:

Mad with terror, the horses of the Soviet artillery — there were almost a thousand of them — hurled themselves into the furnace and broke through the besieging flames and machine guns. Many perished within the flames, but most of them succeeded in reaching the shores of the lake and threw themselves into the water…while still madly struggling, the ice gripped them. The north wind swooped down during the night… Suddenly, with the peculiar vibrating noise of breaking glass, the water froze. The heat balance was broken, and the sea, the lakes, the rivers froze. In such instances, even sea waves are gripped in mid-air and become rounded ice waves suspended in the void. On the following day, when the first [Finnish] Ranger patrols, their hair singed, their faces blackened by smoke, cautiously stepped over the warm ashes in the charred forest and reached the lakeshore, a horrible and amazing sight met their eyes. The lake looked like a vast sheet of white marble on which rested hundreds upon hundreds of horses' heads. They appeared to have been chopped off cleanly with an ax. Only the heads stuck out of the crust of ice. And they were all facing the shore. The white flame of terror still burnt in their wide-open eyes. Close to the shore a tangle of wildly rearing horses rose from the prison of ice.

and this account of what a German Lieutenant Colonel did upon taking a Ukrainian boy-partisan prisoner, as told to a German princess and one of her aristocratic friends:

Finally the officer stopped before the boy, stared at him for a long time in silence, then said in a slow tired voice full of boredom: "Listen, I don't want to hurt you. You are a child, and I am not waging war against children. You have fired at my men, but I am not waging war on children. Lieber Gott, I am not the one who invented war." The officer broke off, then went on in a strangely gentle voice: "Listen, I have one glass eye. It is difficult to tell which is the real one. If you can tell me at once, without thinking about it, which of the two is the glass eye, I will let you go free." "The left eye," replied the boy promptly. "How did you know?" "Because it is the one that has something human in it." …

"I met that officer again later at Soroca on the Dniester — a very serious man, a good father, but a true Prussian, a true Piffke as the Viennese say. He talked to me about his family, about his work. He was an electrical engineer. He also spoke about his son Rudolf, a boy ten years old. It was really difficult to tell the glass eye. He told me that the best glass eyes are made in Germany."   "Stop it!" said Louise. "Every German has a glass eye," I said.

and a third, as though two weren't enough — in this, a very different view of German soldiers (circa 1941) from that of the typical "they were all fanatical criminals" so popular in literature, cinema, and plays (a canard that Malaparte disputes):

The German soldiers returning from the front line, when they reached the village squares, dropped their rifles on the ground in silence. They were coated from head to foot in black mud, their beards were long, their hollow eyes looked like the eyes of the sunflowers, blank and dull. The officers gazed at the soldiers and at the rifles lying on the ground, and kept

*silent. By then the lightning war, the "Blitzkrieg," was over,
the "Dreizigjahrigerblitzkrieg," the thirty-year lighting war,
had begun. The winning war was over, the losing war had begun.
I saw the white stain of fear growing in the dull eyes of
German officers and soldiers. I saw it spreading little by
little, gnawing at the pupils, singeing the roots of the
eyelashes and making the eyelashes drop one by one, like the
long yellow eyelashes of the sunflowers. When Germans become
afraid, when that mysterious German fear begins to creep into
their bones, they always arouse a special horror and pity.
Their appearance is miserable, their cruelty sad, their
courage silent and hopeless. That is when the Germans become
wicked. I repented being a Christian. I felt ashamed of being
a Christian.*

Malaparte had unfettered access as an Italian journalist to
the Eastern Front (when he wasn't in prison for mouthing off),
and describes the events from the persective of someone who
knows the war effort is doomed — far more interestingly
though, are the ways in which he frames these stories, telling
them, as it were, in a series of country clubs and
aristocratic estates to the intellectual and social inheritors
of the West's cultural legacy. Swedish, Spanish, German,
Italian, and French aristocrats and diplomats. Polish
princesses. The wealthy and powerful of another age, now, no
longer so — some of whom, bound for the death camps. Malaparte
catalogues an amazing history of loss, a way of life swept
away forever. The British are largely absent, and come across
when they are described as fairly pragmatic if not necessarily
"good," and the Americans seem, if anything, to be parvenues —
in this sense, *Kaputt* could almost be a companion piece for
Henry James's earlier work — the reflection of American
ambition for social weight in Europe, viewed through the prism
of a massive class war.

Malaparte's writing is powerful and moving, and despite his
politics, it's difficult to see how this book would not have

had a stronger and more sympathetic reception in the West, save for its fundamental conceit: wealth and strength cannot keep you safe during times of war and true social tempest. There is no shelter from that storm, nothing counts in the end save the raw instinct for survival. This sort of morality tale is unwelcome in the capitalist West — this is not the sort of book anyone with property in the Hamptons would like to read, though I would argue that it is the clearest depiction of the horror of war that I have read, cleaner even than Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and certainly far better than any of the "realist" portrayals of wartime (O'Brien, Marlantes, etc) who end up sentimentalizing and therefore implicitly endorsing war, which means they couldn't have thought very well about the experience even if they wrote effectively about it.

Malaparte becomes increasingly more sympathetic to the Soviets over the course of the book, an emotional and sentimental desire to see them as better or more than the Germans in part because they have beaten the Germans, and in part because of the horror the Germans have themselves inflicted, a fact that Malaparte observes firsthand on several occasions. This is interesting as well because the natural evolution of thinking for most in the West is a growing concern that the Soviets will simply replace Nazi Germany — in fact, in terms of history, the Soviets ultimately eclipsed the Nazis as a totem of fear when they acquired the atomic bomb, and became the first non-Western country with the ability to destroy the world. Despite the recent example of the war or perhaps because of it, many German and Italian intellectuals made up their minds to stick with moderates and capitalism after the collapse of Nazi Germany — more of them sided with the Totalitarian Soviets based on a sense that there was something in Communism, and to this day, European communism retains a small but important political presence, often derided in England and America. Malaparte's viewpoint is, therefore, especially interesting considering his various positions before and during World War II.

Brad Pitt and the Myth of the Wehrmacht

Brad Pitt loves playing in WWII movies. He loves fighting Nazis, who, incredibly, really existed, and were (if anything) even more evil than comes across on a movie screen. For 12 years, one of the most civilized, technologically and institutionally advanced countries on earth was ruled by a brutal, vicious band of thugs who employed racial mythology, sentimentalism, romanticism, emotion, intimidation, and murder in their attempt to extort as much wealth as possible from the populations they ruled. While not the worst catastrophe the world has ever witnessed, to put the Nazis in list terms (the only terms most people understand these days), we're probably talking one of the three all-time worst. Almost certainly bottom five, and indisputably bottom ten.

It's important to frame the list in terms of utility, or effectiveness, so as not to unintentionally make the case that this type of behavior is worthy of praise, or anything other than the most resounding condemnation and rejection. Oftentimes people confuse the intensity or degree of an action with its having some sort of value as an accomplishment, which is completely false. An evil accomplishment is not an accomplishment at all — only a fiend would claim different. Therefore, the Nazis and other misfortunes that humanity have inflicted upon itself such as other brands of totalitarianism or authoritarianism should never occupy the "top" of any list — only the bottom, where they belong.

Having established the terms of what we're talking about — which are critical to the debate — I wanted to weigh in on the topic of *Fury* again, in part because some people read my

review and did not understand that I did watch the movie after writing the review based on previews. I watched it for two reasons: first, because when a woman says she wants to watch a war movie for a date, only a churl says: "no." Second, because I'd made the emotional if somewhat foolhardy claim that if *Fury* revealed anything new or fundamentally true about life or war by using different weapons than Saving Private Ryan, I'd boil and eat my leather shoe. I stood by that claim, but not without some trepidation as curtain time approached.

I should have trusted my gut. As composed, *Fury* was a confused series of cliches (many of which have been described elsewhere at great length) cobbled together around three competing assertions (contained within the protagonist): **one**, that the Nazis and specifically the SS were an antagonist of such manifest evil that to battle and kill them when and wherever possible was the highest possible good, **two**, that America and Americans were essentially different from the Nazis as expressed by the SS, a fact that explained or excused the actions of American soldiers within that context, and **three** that in war, people tend to develop tribes based on their unit — and in a tank, especially a Sherman tank, the weapon itself, the tank, becomes a part of the tribe — a living part of the unit.

Fury billed itself as a "realistic" movie, and a lot of the marketing surrounding the film concerned its attention to detail as well as the importance to the actors and studio that they "get it right," so it's worth discussing how the movie measured up based on those standards. Based on every reliable review I've seen from subject matter experts, the Germans and Americans were outfitted with equipment and weapons appropriate for the time, and those weapons functioned more or less as one would expect. The Americans aren't facing the Wehrmacht of 1941, they're facing militia reserves composed of children and old men, and the ineffectiveness of many German units in the face of American combat power (the missed shots,

the shoddy equipment, etc.) can be explained as bad craftsmen misusing their tools. The deaths were realistic — people died characteristically realistically considering the medium, rather than unrealistically.

SPOILER

There is a scene with a Tiger tank that arrives with about 30 minutes left to go in the movie. One understands immediately that in a movie named for a tank, the Tiger will likely not destroy Fury and then rumble away as the protagonist (played by Brad Pitt), a troubled staff sergeant named Wardaddy, leads his crew to safety. The question becomes whether the American close air support (featured shortly before the tanks roll out) will show up and knock out the Tiger, or whether somehow Fury and the other tanks will outmaneuver the Tiger and knock it out, or some other plausible scenario, for example maybe Brad Pitt knows how to make sticky bombs [like Tom Hanks](). In a brilliant reference to the old GI Joe cartoons, where Cobras would unload battalions worth of firepower on the outgunned and outnumbered Joes, missing every time, the Tiger manages to destroy the other non-Fury tanks, then miss or score glancing hits (from point blank range with AP ammo) on Fury, until Wardaddy has maneuvered the tank behind the Tiger, and scores a direct hit seconds before the Tiger manages to miss again, or score another dramatic near-miss.

BACK TO NON-SPOILER

The presentation of time-appropriate weapons and equipment, and the opening combat sequences, are all very well done, if on the melodramatic side. As time went on, though, the tactics, the strategy, how collections of people tended to move and work on an aggregate and specific level became less and less "realistic," while still purporting to strive for that standard. And this is a shame — if the movie had

embraced the surreal, if it had let the "realism" go in favor of something more impressionistic, it could have avoided the absurd, cliched pitfall into which it ended up falling. Instead, it doubled down on its commitment to the narrative, the plot, and those three aforementioned competing assertions, which brings the Sherman tank, Fury, led by Wardaddy, to a crossroads that must be defended at all costs.

META SPOILER

Lest I be seen as a hater (someone who just criticizes success to make myself sound clever or fill some internal insecurity or bitterness), allow me to propose an alternative movie, which I found to be much closer to the truth about the horrors of war, (if less "realistic") — and which I proposed in my preview review of *Fury — Cross of Iron*. In [the end of *Cross of Iron*, a corrupt and ambitious Prussian Captain wants a Cross of Iron, and follows a heroic enlisted German soldier into a suicidal counterattack](). This action occurs during a Russian assault in which the German unit is being overrun, and the action is remarkably even-handed — Russians and Germans are slaughtered indiscriminately, and heroic actions are presented as tiny tragedies. The protagonist and the Captain are fired upon — by a child — and the Captain can't figure out how to reload his submachine gun. The enlisted German soldier — Steiner, played brilliantly by James Coburn — sees this happen and begins laughing hysterically. The Russian child soldier is so disgusted by the Prussian's incompetence and desperation that he rolls his eyes rather than shooting again. The Prussian officer pathetically puts his helmet on backwards, still without having reloaded his submachine gun while Steiner laughs at the tragic absurdity of it all. From there, the movie cuts to the ending credits a series of stills of an execution carried out by Nazis, Steiner's laughter ringing in our ears. The credits are, collectively, one of the most powerfully damning pieces of evidence against the Nazis I've seen in any movie, ever.

I cannot stress enough how untrue and devastatingly inaccurate — unrealistic — any statement other than the one attempted by Peckinpah is. In order to make something real, there has to be something at stake. *Fury* wagers nothing, and presents the audience with a conclusion that's about as far from *Cross of Iron* as one could get.

META SPOLER COMPLETE — INITIATE SPOILER

At the end of *Fury*, the tank is disabled by a German anti-tank mine, cleverly placed in a piece of key strategic terrain. As it happens, Wardaddy's crew has been tasked with defending this terrain against a possible German counterattack — they are the only protection remaining between the Germans and an American resupply column. It is an afternoon in April, 1945. One of the tank's crew mans an OP, and discovers, with horror, that a full Battalion of adult male (i.e. veteran) SS panzer grenadier infantry is approaching down the road, singing, marching, panzerfausts at the ready — full of esprit de corps and savage intention, the kind we know is bad because they're SS.

Let's suspend disbelief — I'm sure it's possible such an event like this happened, even near the end of the war. I read a memoir by an [SS infantry officer called *Black Edelweiss*](#) which should be required reading for every young American male, as a cautionary tale of how propaganda and blind nationalism can lead even the best-intentioned young men astray. The author (writing for understandable reasons under the guise of a pseudonym) describes how his unit was shifted from the far north of Finland to Germany in January-February of 1945. Moving at night via ship, train, and foot to avoid being strafed or bombed, the unit was detected during an attack and strafed, bombed, and shelled nearly out of existence before seeing any enemy (American or British) soldiers. The survivors were then sent on a series of increasingly absurd missions, culminating, for the author, in a pointless and near-suicidal defense of a position with a single machine-gun

against two Sherman tanks, which coincided with his injury and incarceration.

So this unit of SS infantrymen is moving in formation, singing, near the frontline, down a road, in a place where the Americans have aerial domination (uncontested access to the skies). It seems incredible — but maybe this is just a testament to confidence in their fighting prowess. The soldier at the OP runs back to tell Wardaddy about the situation — 300 enemy veteran soldiers, trucks, vehicles, kitted out to fight. Wardaddy's reaction is to announce that the others should return to the unit, but that he's carrying out the mission — he's manning Fury, staying with the tank, to repulse the Germans. The other American soldiers in the tank concur that this is a sound and reasonable plan, and they set about prepping for an ambush, in a scene that echoes the ending of Saving Private Ryan.

Now — the ambush and ensuing battle are relatively unimportant, and filled with the type of improbable and ludicrous cinematic excesses one would rightly expect it to contain. The crew guns down Germans as though they were pigeons; for their part, the Germans have inexplicably packed away the Panzerfausts they were carrying in cumbersome boxes. The SS has forgotten to fight, or perhaps never learned — something that would be slightly more believable if the unit were not filled with veteran adults, rather than cannon-fodder children. It's important, vital, even, to note here that every serious military analyst has credited Germany's early battlefield successes and long survival against impossible odds to a marked tactical superiority over their Russian, British, and American foes — the myth that German military success derived from technological superiority is a convenient invention of video game producers, Hollywood, and daytime television hucksters. The truth of the matter is that, outgunned, outproduced, and outmatched in almost every important category, the Germans held on because they outfought

their enemies tactically almost everywhere, finding themselves bested occasionally by elite American units in areas like Bastogne, or by Russians at Kursk. Much of WWII was, for the Allies, a function of merely holding on, shelling the Germans with artillery and bombing them while our inferior soldiers made incremental gains against exhausted and increasingly ill-trained conscripts. This is not embarrassing or shameful — we won a modern war against a country attempting to fight along pre-modern lines (using human ingenuity against weapons). On top of which, the Nazis were, as described before, a pack of evil and unscrupulous bullies who needed to be stopped. So — to come back to the original point — Fury inflicts massive losses on the Germans, who continue to rush the tank rather than flanking it, or doing anything even the most basic military unit knows to do. As a combat-proven, valorously decorated former airborne infantry officer who has seen combat firsthand, I can say this without a shadow of doubt: in reality, the ambush and combat go down very differently from how they are portrayed in the movie.

When Brad Pitt's Wardaddy dies — shot twice, heroically, by a German sniper, then finished off by two grenades dropped into the tank by a final rush by the Germans (their fourth or fifth?) — he is presented like a figure in a [painting by Titian] or one of the old masters.

I've thought about why this must've been for some time, why none of it hung together. I mean, sure, anyone who has been to combat and knows how the thing works must find a movie like *Fury* condescending and trite. But why did the director and actors decide to play the movie this way? Why undercut the basic premise that the Germans were a serious, formidable foe? My hypothesis is that Hollywood has been producing these movies for so long that it has actually lost it's understanding of why or how the Nazis and SS were evil. Hollywood and popular culture — which have always placed more value on aesthetics and beauty than ideas, have become

fascinated with the SS and Nazis as symbols of evil, but not as actually evil. So they pay lip service to the idea that the Nazis are horrible, and the SS are just the worst, and fail utterly to understand that the worst thing of all is human fanaticism, is bullying — the urge to destroy, divested of humanity, and invested with a purpose that confuses ends with means. The ends, for every combat veteran who's spent more than a few weeks in *real* combat, is (1) staying alive, and (2) helping keep one's buddies stay alive. The moment at which Wardaddy decides to stay with his tank, and is then absolutely fine with having his crew with him is the moment, for me, that the movie became both unrealistic and inaccurate, as well as untrue — in part due to Wardaddy's decision to damn his crew, and in part due to the way in which their efforts to stop the Germans were portrayed in valedictory terms, rather than under a mound of opprobrium.

Fury works when it's a movie about a German tank, filled with SS soldiers who are even at the end of the war and if somewhat skeptically in all practical terms, still committed to fighting and dying for their Fuhrer. Defending a crossroads against impossible odds? Check — the SS was famous for doing precisely that, even though it was stupid and pointless. Ambushing an American military unit many times its size, with the full weight of the U.S. military behind it, and the inevitability of artillery and air power once identified? Check — happened on more occasions than are worth recounting here. *Fury* is a movie about an SS tank, led by the German-speaking Brad Pitt, which is fanatically devoted to the proposition that the enemies of Germany must be stopped at all costs.

Otherwise it doesn't make any sense at all. Worse, by allowing one of the Americans (the "good" one) to live, and by killing the others off heroically against impossible odds, *Fury* sends an awful and inherently misguided message about war, which contributes to the same tired old myth that helps lead America

into foolish conflicts today. Good people understand when it is appropriate to head off to war, and do not need convincing — this myth of the necessity to throw one's life away for nothing is far beyond absurd — it is, in fact, obscene. I hope not to see more movies about World War II like *Fury* — perhaps it will be the last. It would be unrealistic of me to actually expect that, though.

Fury: A Realistic but Stupid, Useless Film

Hollywood does not know how to make a film about war. This has been proven on so many different occasions, often averred on this blog, across the spectrum of time and experience, that I almost wonder why I'm bothering to write another essay on the subject. There are other projects I could be working on — short fiction, advocacy for responsible foreign policy, poetry, running. Developing personal relationships. Finding a useful pursuit beyond criticizing gross failures of imagination, when — to be perfectly frank — nobody's listening, anyway.

When I watched the preview of *Fury* I immediately tweeted about it — words to the effect of "Saving Private Ryan with Tanks." I have not watched the movie, as Michael Cieply did before reviewing it for *The New York Times*, but I've read his review, and combined with the two-plus minutes of preview I endured (several times), I feel confident delivering my reaction to the movie in full. Here's me lifting my glass to the previewers, and Cieply, who seemed to feel pleased that the

film was made, because I will not waste my money on it, it's certain to be trash. Worse than that, the type of trash that deceives its watchers into thinking they've done something useful, or honored their grandparents, or I don't know what.

Here are some excerpts from the beginning of his review: "Raw." "The Good War this is not." "Hero." "Relentlessly authentic." "Poised to deliver what popular culture has rarely seen." "Executed prisoners and killed children." Later on in the review, after exposition on the significance of a movie dedicated to the tankers, and the crews of Sherman tanks, "Much of what [Pitt's] Wardaddy does may shocked viewers who have watched American soldiers behave brutally in Vietnam War films at least since 'Apocalypse Now,' but have rarely seen ugliness in the heroes of World War II." "In his harsh initiation of a new gunner, Mr. Pitt's Character crosses lines, both legal and moral. Not even Lee Marvin's Sergeant Possum in Samuel Fuller's 'The Big Red One,' another knife killer, went quite so far."

"This time around, the subject will be those damaged tanker-heroes."

Give me a break.

Without watching the movie, based on the preview, and *The New York Times* review, I'm going to head out on a limb and claim that if specific catalogue of carnage using *different weapons than we're used to* reveals some epiphany about the horror of war, I'll eat a leather shoe.

I'll do it. So help me god, I'll boil one of my leather shoes, and eat it.

According to the review, there's a scene in the movie where

someone from Wardaddy's crew has to kill a "buddy." A tank gunner vet quoted in the review claims that he didn't see that type of behavior himself while serving 28 months overseas during WWII — one imagines that such events happened, even if they were exceptional. So what? There's a great deal about how this movie isn't *Inglorious Basterds,* although there's another knife scene in it — presumably realistic, to show the grit of war, because according to the review (and the movie's actors and makers), war is a series of physical actions more or less without negative consequence, unless you're the person getting killed or stabbed.

A great deal of time is spent in the review on the writer/director, David Ayer, and his bona fides, as though that has anything to do with whether the movie is good, or accurate, or useful. Apparently Ayer has a man-cave in Los Angeles packed with war memorabilia. Apparently he himself served in the Navy during the 1980s, on a submarine crew. Apparently he reads lots of historical fiction and non-fiction accounts of World War II. Apparently any of that, combined with Brad Pitt, means he knows how to write and direct a "good" war movie worth watching.

It sounds like his movie sucks balls.

Here's how *Fury* could maybe not be a movie that totally blows, and should never have been made (I'd be happy to eat that shoe if I'm proven wrong, because it will have been worth it to be wrong):

- The violence does not lead anywhere, and is seen visibly eroding good people and changing them in ways they do not like, and does them no good
- Combat is seen as a sequence of misfortunes, ideally misfortunes that befall the actor rather than the subject. Guns jam in comical ways. Soldiers shit themselves. People shake and weep. I'm guessing that Brad Pitt isn't the sort of character (at least not if

he's being described as a hero) that he played in *12 Monkeys* — batshit crazy, crying in the mayhem, barely able to function. No — I'm guessing he's the guy who sticks knives into Nazi skulls, which everyone knows is cool.

- At least one of the soldiers should do something despicable — not like killing their buddy because they have to, to save him/her (unless it's a major plot point), but because they enjoy it. I'd recommend the rape of someone vulnerable, say, a French or Jewish refugee. This should point to that character's basic cowardice as a human being, a point underlined by their altruistic (not necessarily poor) performance in combat. It should go without saying that this soldier would be American.

At some point — maybe *Saving Private Ryan* — people decided that realistic portrayals of combat were socially useful because they were honest and brutal, and *I assume* that was supposed to dissuade people from wanting to experience war. If this is an idea that's floating around in Hollywood, please allow me to argue vigorously against it. Many people I knew in the military (the two other primary contributors to this blog, Mr. Carson and Mr. James being definite exceptions) loved those movies, called them "badass," and watched them over and over again. The weak secondary characters were disliked, and the enemies were hated. No deeper meaning was extracted from the films. Again — if Hollywood feels that making a realistic movie about tanks, or submarines, or bombers, or fighter planes, or black units, or white units, or Navajo units, or *anything* fighting Nazis and the SS and the commies is going to make young people feel revulsion toward war, or horror at its deprivations — they're delusional. *Fury* will merely be added to a long list of factually probable representations of violence that help beat the drums for another generation of people to glamorize the worst parts of state-sanctioned murder, and prepare them to serve in misbegotten causes.

Which brings me to my final thought, and I've had this thought for a while: if the big Hollywood producers were interested in making a good war film about World War II, they could do a lot worse than reading *2666*, meditating for a while, and then creating a film that takes Peckinpah's superlative *Cross of Iron* and elevates it to the next level. Yes: I'm proposing that the best way to create a useful and accurate anti-war film would be to make the protagonists Germans — preferably German light infantry, the type that got chewed up on the Eastern Front with casualty rates somewhere above 1,000%, then was redeployed to the Western Front to fight the Americans and promptly bombed out of existence, for no good reason at all. The greatest mine for really good, true war stories, in my opinion, is the *Wehrmacht* — my guess is that nobody in Hollywood has the guts to put that movie together. After all, America's about winning, and the Nazis were evil, and every German was a Nazi. And so we'll continue singing ourselves to sleep at night with patriotic tunes on our lips, secure in our confidence that Brad Pitt and his buddies did what they had to because in the end, it was just a bad dream.