New Nonfiction by Alan Stoskopf: If I Don’t Create, I Don’t Exist

The scars of war are everywhere in Kharkiv. Destroyed or damaged apartment complexes, stores, hospitals, museums, and schools litter its urban landscape. The Russian full-scale invasion of February 2022 has not just killed or injured thousands of the city’s residents it has embedded itself into the psyches of young and old living in Ukraine’s second largest city. Yet, people carry on despite living under the dark shadow of Russia less than 20 miles away.

Berlin, and the Trip East

They’re rebuilding Prussian Berlin. Not exactly the way it was before World War II, but Prussia is unquestionably the inspiration. The city is unified, the country is unified, and for the first time in the 21st century, there is a desire to rediscover a German narrative beyond the horrors spawned by World War II. Construction along the city’s broad boulevards, paintings of Frederick the Great mustering out boxes of jauntily-clad soldiers, emphasis on a type of architectural façade as well as a certain indescribable impression one receives in the beer halls and coffee shops – everything points in the same direction. Rebirth is in the air this Spring, the rebirth of a confident Germany, a Germany that can assert its place in the world without the ever-present burden of recent history. Further east, Russia seems to be undergoing a similar sort of national rebirth. I'm uncomfortable with

both of them. To hell with rebirth, to hell with Spring, to hell with the nice weather and puffed-out chests. Let's live in the cold.

At dinner, with German officers from the Bundeswehr. We'd served together in Afghanistan, and their thoughts on history and the direction of Germany had influenced my own for some years. They'd taken part in the first offensive actions for Germany since World War II – fighting overseas and having to abandon hard lessons from the 20th century in order to support the Global War on Terror had left them adrift in their own country. Imagine: what must it be like, to discard one's grandfathers' and grandmothers' experience – to have been told and educated to hate what they had done in the 1930s and 40s – and then later be told to discard the experience of one's father and mother as well? My own experiences protesting Iraq, joining the military, and fighting in Afghanistan inspired in me a strong sense of fellowship and sympathy with my German veteran friends, bereft and necessarily abandoned by their own countrymen. The conversation is brisk, over a traditional Bavarian meal of sausage, hamburger, potatoes and mustard with plenty of beer to wash the meal down. The officers discuss the state of the German military – funding is difficult to come by. They talk about the new mission to Mali, the challenges faced in training the local forces, which we'd seen before with the Afghans. Four battle groups of Malian forces were recently sent north to reclaim a city, and failed completely – routed by the insurgents. When I ask them about Ukraine, they seem uninterested in the subject, save to point out that there is a great deal of sympathy in Germany for the Russian perspective, and for the narrative that this conflict has been caused by America and NATO. The idea that this quarrel could spill into Poland or Germany is unthinkable. They are, as I was when I was in the military, focused entirely on solving the problems facing their units today. This is what it's like to be in the German military: no money, no support from politicians, little respect from a resentful population, and a

mission to Mali.

Walking back to the hotel Adlon Kempinski from lunch with a colleague, I pass the Russian embassy. There's a small gathering in the middle of Unter Der Linden, the long tree-lined Prussian boulevard that leads to an iconic sight in Berlin: Brandenburg Tor. Two older men and four women in their mid- to late-forties have assembled a small collage of photos from the war in Ukraine. I approach the man doing the most talking. He smells unwashed, and wears a disheveled tweed jacket and slacks, as well as tinted glasses. The women mill nervously and huddle close as he begins lecturing me about the horrors of war with heavily Russian-accented English. According to him, this war is the fault of America and NATO. America wants to buy Ukraine, and the whole world. He points at a picture of dead children and body parts and repeats his indictment of America. I want to know why – why he thinks America is doing this, what its motivation could be. He cannot or will not explain his reasoning, and I leave him, feeling that any explanation for what he described as the United States' actions, however unsatisfying, would be better than no explanation at all. He is the only man shouting in Berlin.

Earlier, talking with a German anthropologist / ethnographer. What's going on in Germany? What's happening? He tells me about the rise of right-wing extremism in a country long unused to such impulses, the people called "*Putinverstehe*" or "Putin-understanders," who see American expansionism as basically responsible for Russia's recent actions in and around Ukraine. He explains that there's a growing lack of confidence in facts, or the news, analogous to radical elements in America's Tea Party, or certain groups on the fringes of the left. There's a movement – "*ludenpresse*," or "lying press," where any story reported by the media is decried as unreliable. My own voyage to Ukraine has been conceived based on a skepticism toward media reports, but this

phenomenon of “lying press” is something different. I am not disputing that facts can be reported, I don’t think the media lies, or intentionally misrepresents reality, merely that it is interested in selling newspapers or articles, and that tends to narrow the focus of how facts are presented. Journalism is possible, today, and as necessary as ever. The crisis of confidence in media outlets seems to be in part political – unscrupulous politicians, propaganda from Russia, a growing sense of Germany’s vulnerability, its position outside history. Maybe, I add, America does have something to do with it as well – a country doesn’t just decide to assign responsibility for a situation. In Russia, perhaps, the Russian people are used to the idea of America as an enemy, just like Americans are accustomed to remembering the Russians we grew up watching in James Bond films. It seems to me, I remember a time when it felt like (I could be wrong) there was an opportunity to revise that narrative – to present an alternative to the Russian-versus-American story. But back in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russians continued to play the role of bad guy in media, in movies, politics and television shows. Now, it may be too late to change that story.

Leaving Berlin, I remembered an accident of history: one of the reasons the South is supposed to have lost to the North in the United States’ Civil War had to do with railway tracks. Among other issues, there were different standard gauges of track in different states – Virginia and North Carolina shared the same track-style, but the rest of the South did not. Towns and states did not decide of their own accord to build a rail system where the tracks ran uninterrupted. This caused numerous delays unloading and reloading trains with people and equipment at town and state borders, amounting to the loss of hours or even days during longer hauls. I don’t know if this actually contributed to the defeat of the South, but it seems plausible to me that time wasted unloading and reloading trains, every day, could very easily have been multiplied over the long run. The North, on the other hand, enjoyed uniform,

connected railways that linked towns and cities across the length and breadth of the Union. One of the things you learn, in Warsaw, trying to take a train to Ukraine, is that Ukraine has a different railway system, with different tracks, and that one must wait at the border for about an hour while the train is lifted from one carriage onto another set of wheels. Furthermore, one must transfer at least twice during the trip, and I found no trains that could make the journey in less than 16 hours. There's no direct way to reach Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, by rail from Warsaw, the capital of neighboring Poland. There are, on the other hand, direct trains from Russia to Kiev, that take between 10 and 12 hours.

The back-room bar is a popular form in Berlin, and is suitable to the city's recent history as a place of spying and intrigue. A roommate from college is in town, and he brings me to two of the better bars in the city. One has a long bar and rows of whiskeys and bourbons lined up. I'm surprised to find (among the rest) bottles of Pappy Van Winkle, about which I've only read. The bartender explains that there are better bourbons that aren't as well known, and treats us to glasses of a bourbon I've never heard of. Smelling the booze sets my nose afire, and drinking it does the same to my throat. Later we talk about the Bundeswehr. Everyone left in the bar has served, and has a story about their time in the service. Somehow Ukraine doesn't come up. Instead, they want to talk about *American Sniper*. When we leave, it's light outside. The next night we head to a different bar, which has few brand alcohols displayed. This, I am told, places emphasis on the cocktail – its preparation, the presentation, and enjoyment on its own terms. Each bar is among the best in the world, and appeals to a different human sensibility – the one, a desire to drink well-known, branded alcohols. The other, a desire to feel serviced, to be part of a production. Both are absolutely excellent. When I inquire about Ukraine at the second bar I'm asked to keep my voice down.

As my departure from Berlin looms, I am seized with an unreasonable fear of the future, of the East. Relics of Germany's defeat and downfall are scattered about the city-scape. Check-Point Charlie, aging concrete residential buildings, a huge radio tower that looms over the city like a giant retro antenna. It's not hard to imagine being a young man in a different Germany, in a different era, hearing that one has been assigned to the East – the Eastern Front. What must that have felt like, in 1943 or 1944, knowing what was happening against the Soviets? Knowing that the train ride through Poland would only end in one place – bloody, broken, bleeding on the battlefield? Malaparte talks about the look of fear in German soldiers' eyes in 1942, and I can feel it, too, that fear. I worry that the lessons of World War II – the carnage of the Eastern Front, of The Holocaust, are vanishing. In the Holocaust memorial, three young girls with backpacks carry a "selfie-stick" and huddle close around the center girl as they walk deeper into the memorial.

One restaurant my college roommate and I visit lets us down – a place called *Pantry*. When we arrive, the place is noisy but not particularly busy, while the bar is completely full. We are greeted by a short balding man. I ask, in English, what sort of food they serve. He asks if we have a reservation. I tell him that we do not, and he says that it will be impossible to serve us. His eyes have narrowed, in that way the eyes do when they are seeing something they don't like. It occurs to me that somehow I've offended him – that I've made a tactical error by feeling so comfortable in his country, and with my friend, that my speaking English has for whatever reason alienated him, that he has interpreted the gesture as being indicative of a lack of respect for his culture, or a gesture of American imperialism, and that's not it at all. In fact, it's sort of the opposite – it's a moment of human vulnerability. I cannot redress the error, though I try. He has judged me.

There are no direct flights from Warsaw to Kiev. Everything requires a connection, a transfer, a wait. This is characteristic of the ways in which European countries still, in spite of the hopeful promise of the EU, view their neighbors with suspicion. Otherwise, how to explain this: I board my plane in Warsaw, then fly back to Frankfort. At Frankfort, and the other passengers unload from the plane onto a bus at gate B25. I ask whether I might just enter the terminal, as my gate is B33, and am told that this is impossible. The other passengers and I then take the bus back to the terminal, where the bus disembarkation is delayed just ten feet from the terminal doors – "please do not exit the bus, it has not arrived at the terminal," we are told. Five minutes later the doors open, we disembark, and I make my way through passport control. B33 is about a kilometer away. I run it, a flat-out run, and after a brief pause at gate B25 to take note of the situation and mentally shake my fist at the whole arrangement, I continue on to my gate, arriving as boarding begins. I think about how much easier such a transfer would have been in almost any U.S. airport. The transition from State to Federal identity is still contested in the United States – it seems that in Europe, it is really just beginning. This is an important thing to note when considering our own position, when evaluating the situation in Ukraine, and – as in Iraq and Afghanistan – what we're really capable of contributing, how best to help.