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.

New Poetry from Shannon Huffman Polson: “On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol”

BETWEEN THE CRACKS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

On Orthodox Easter in Mariupol

We finished our jelly beans
red and yellow, purple, green,
the last bite of chocolate, unaware

that over in Mariupol
on this most holy day
sleepless mothers cradle children
on a steel factory floor.

Christ is Risen!

But in Mariupol people lie crushed,
the crossbeam too heavy,
cold factory chimneys rising cruelly
against the grey sky.

Nobody steps in from the crowd
to carry the cross.
There is no crowd
but circled tanks

in Mariupol.

Where is the Risen Christ
in Mariupol?

Outside the factory
mud is drying, small flowers
pushing up
between the cracks,
the birds returning, unaware

that inside people wait
in darkness,
the factory made for steel,
not people—
they sit
in vigil,
waiting.

On the Subject of Walls

While it's fallen off the news somewhat, one of Donald Trump's most conspicuous campaign-trail promises was to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. Not only did Trump say that a wall was necessary, but he said that he would get *Mexico* to build it, conveniently ducking the question of cost to U.S. citizens. This is because the border between the U.S. and Mexico is long, and walls are expensive. Especially the kind of well-built walls that are required to stop crafty humans from getting around them.

Ukraine has a wall of its own. Or, at least, it's building a wall. Sort of. In September 2014, during the height of Russia's attempts to intervene in Ukraine, shortly after Russia occupied Crimea and during the beginning of its ongoing incursion into Ukraine's east, lawmakers developed a plan to create a wall between Russia and Ukraine.

The wall received some coverage in Western Press—not much, but some—because building a wall along thousands of kilometers of territory is a big project, and the wall had a big number attached to it: 4 billion UAH (at 8 UAH to the dollar in 2014, $500 million, now at 26 UAH to the dollar, or about $160 million). The wall was scheduled for completion in 2018, and building commenced. Since then, there have been questions over whether or not it will be completed on time, according to the printed standards. There have been allegations of corruption, as well as questions over whether the planned structure would be capable of accomplishing its military mission of stopping Russian infiltration and military intrusion.

A Wall in Name Only

Based on reporting that I have done, including visits to the wall and interviews with subject matter experts, national security personnel, veterans, villagers living within 10 km of

the wall, and online research, if the wall is completed as promised and planned, it will not serve as a significant military obstacle against Russia. Without being able to find any evidence beyond official statements and visual confirmation that *something* is being built, it's impossible to decisively state anything. Has money been embezzled? Maybe. It's Ukraine, so, maybe *probably*. Is the wall being built to standard? Has every meter of the border with Russia been accounted for? There's no way to confirm that construction has succeeded or failed.

As of right now, the wall consists of two elements. The first, which looks much like what the wall was supposed to be based on initial projections, are a series of well-developed emplacements near significant border crossing points along major highways. Ukraine's State Border Service and military units staff and patrol these sections, guarding against sabateurs, infiltrators, and the possibility of a Russian military offensive. Practically speaking, of course, a ditch, concertina wire and double-fences won't create much more than a brief tactical pause for even the smallest military unit (and no pause for airborne or air assault units)—but (apparently) according to military thinkers and the politicians who give them strategic guidance, something is better than nothing at all.

This reality has given rise to a new story: the idea that the wall will be useful for stopping criminal activity. Smugglers and illegal border crossings will be diminished by the wall, which (along with the security provided by the wall) will help make Ukraine a safer and more law-abiding place. This has some merit to it, although it's also worth stating that every person with whom I spoke living near the wall viewed it as an eyesore at best, an actual nuisance at worst, and that it

seemed (paradoxically) to be increasing smuggling and illegal activity—precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Notwithstanding the views of its residents, the border area with Russia is startlingly, astonishingly open. When I visited the area north of Kharkiv last in February, I nearly walked *into* Russia. There was no wall present, though residents were on edge, and warned me (through the Ukrainian who was interpreting) that patrols came by every few minutes looking for people who didn't have a reason for being there. I assumed that they meant Ukrainian patrols.

As of February 2017, two years after the battle of Debaltseve and three years after the invasion of Crimea, it was still possible to walk into Russia from Ukraine, more or less accidentally.

Why Should We Build a Wall?

Walls require strength and power, and wealth. They require organization and commitment, and maintenance. They are also the single most noticeable evidence of a nation's insecurity and fragility. What nation requires walls? What confident *people* would even think about erecting barriers? A weak nation, filled with anxious and neurotic people. And while this describes Ukraine to a certain extent—with all due respect to my Ukrainian friends, whom I love and respect, and with due respect for the idea of a country called Ukraine, (a) Ukraine as a country lacks significant allies, and has an overwhelmingly powerful enemy on its doorstep while (b) its people are justifiably traumatized by the repeated revolutions

and various attempts by Russia and Russian agents to undermine their economy, political autonomy, military, and (writ large) their independence.

Those justifications don't travel very well when the destination is the U.S.A. Although walls require power, money, and strength to build, they aren't *for* the powerful, they're for the weak, the fragile, the exhausted. Walls exist where there is no energy left to patrol, where one believes that some powerful energy or tendency toward chaos and entropy will, left *un*walled, lead inexorably to conquest. This is what certain Americans believe: that a wall with Mexico is necessary, presumably because Mexico is more powerful, and left to its own devices, Mexico's Mexican inhabitants will swarm over the border and destroy what they find on the other side.

Of course, if U.S. citizens legitimately believed that Mexicans constituted some type of threat, the response to Mexico would be different from wall-building. What Americans fear is not Mexico—it's the loss of control, it's not being able to convince others that it is in their best interests to behave according to America's best interests. In many ways, this has been the story of the millennium, a slow-building narrative since the towers came down on 9/11.

On a psychological level, it seems almost certain that to Americans, the wall with Mexico is a replacement for the Twin Towers. We want to rebuild the towers and protect them from being blown up. We will call the product of this constructive but paranoiac impulse "The Wall with Mexico." It's a sad and quixotic impulse, if impossible due to constraints built into the space-time continuum.

But Why Build a Wall at All?

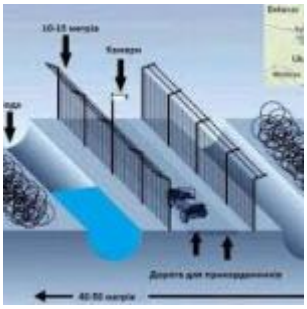
There are good points to be made against the building of walls. They restrict commerce, dampen the flow of accurate firsthand experience between citizens of different countries, reduce the ability of people to communicate, and lead to factionalism, nationalism, and the dangerous kind of international competition.

Walls are a last resort, when one must defend oneself against some foe that cannot be deterred by any other means. They are fixed positions that generate no revenue and require great sums for their upkeep. They can be avoided with the use of airplanes, rockets, and boats. They are as useful and necessary as fixed fortifications (which is to say, not very).

Ukraine’s excuse for building a wall is that it’s hard up for emotionally satisfying ways to thwart Russia. A wall is something that is seen, and can be measured, and will make it more difficult to enter Ukraine from Russia. There are many downsides, but from the perspective of Ukraine, a much smaller country than Russia, and isolated from meaningful alliances, building a wall is *something* (given that it actually gets built, rather than partially funded while the remainder of the funds designated to build it are pillaged by oligarchs).

Ukraine’s planned wall with Russia—the word impregnable quickly springs to mind

Where the wall is supposed to be and what it’s supposed to look like



No attacker could ever possibly breach this conceptual wall, it is perfect

For Americans, the question is different. To begin with, it is a more powerful country than Mexico—the most powerful nation in the world, in fact. Its southern border with Mexico is patrolled by drones, security personnel, helicopters, dogs, radar, and automatic detection systems. There is already a fence separating the two. *Inside* the U.S., it’s very difficult to exist off the grid without eventually running into some electronic or procedural requirement that will establish that one is in the country illegally (whether the people monitoring those systems do anything about it or not is a different question).

Normally, one builds walls under desperate circumstances when no other possibilities are available to solve some critical international question or another. Mexico's turmoil stems from the illegal drug trade. The drug trade is profitable in part because it is so unpleasant to live in a capitalist society that objectifies its citizens that many U.S. citizens will pay excellent money for drugs that are easily fabricated and refined in Mexico, and in part because the U.S. (despite creating and abetting the conditions by which citizens would want to use drugs in the first place) has criminalized non-prescription drug use, artificially inflating the market to the point where Mexican citizens involved in the trade can afford to build private armies large enough to contend with the government's military (or simply buy government units wholesale). Rather than build a wall with Mexico, it'd be cheaper and ethically more humane to do something about the drug trade—legalizing and taxing drugs would be an excellent first step.

Ukraine cannot "settle" with a Russia intent on its partition and destruction—Ukraine is left with the unpleasant choice of having to just grit its teeth and do what it can to prevent Russian intrusion. A wall isn't the best way to do that, and especially when details of the wall's construction are kept secret. Still, it's *understandable* in a way that the U.S. wall with Mexico is not.

1917: Ukraine's First Bid to

be Independent

The Red Revolution created space for independence in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and – for a time – in Ukraine

This February marks the 100 year anniversary of an event that transformed Europe, brought the US into WWI, and nearly led to the destruction of capitalism. While it seems farfetched from the perspective of our western-dominated consumer-capitalist world order, a union between workers and soldiers—February Revolution, in Petrograd (now St. Petersberg)—toppled Russia's Tsar Nicholas II and terrified the US and Europe.

These events also led to a (briefly) independent Ukraine. After it declared independence, Ukraine was embroiled in its first war for sovereignty and self-governance.

Military background

It's impossible to imagine an independent Ukraine or the Russian revolution that made independence possible without WWI. Contemporary discussions of the feasibility of leftist organization or revolution in Europe or the US often overlook the importance of that extraordinarily damaging war to Lenin's success.

And it didn't take *much* war—the workers and soldiers of Petrograd rejected Moscow's authority after a bit more than two years of fighting. Consider by contrast that Germany would not surrender until 1918, and only after pushing Great Britain and France to the very brink of their own capitulation. Germany and Austria-Hungary differed from Russia, of course, in that both of them incorporated democratic mechanisms into their governance—whereas the Russian government was barely changed from that which had resisted Napoleon in 1812.

Critically, too, Russia was not directly attacked by Germany or Austria-Hungary—from the outset, those nations were fighting a war of self-defense, where Russia was the aggressor. Its largely-disenfranchised citizens did not see throwing millions of lives away in the name of "alliance" and land grabs as a good exchange.

Fighting in WWI was bloody, dramatic, industrial. As a country whose industrial base was more thoroughly exploited than others, the blood Russian soldiers shed told more deeply. Brusilov's Offensive—a battle that lasted from June to September of 1916 that ended in major Russian gains, still entailed millions of killed and wounded on both sides. More than any other battle, Brusilov's offensive was responsible for creating the conditions necessary for an independent Ukraine in both Austria Hungary and Russia.

As Russia's social order frayed, Germany and Austria-Hungary held on along the Western Front, scored important victories against the Romanians and Italians, and slowly fell back along the Eastern Front. While Russia advanced into Austro-Hungarian Galicia (part of modern-day Ukraine), trading heavy casualties for territory, its ctizens grew increasingly disgusted with the war. This disgust took different forms for the Russians, Fins, Estonians, Ukrainians, and Poles fighting for the Russian military.

It also wrecked Austria-Hungary's military and strained their society to the limit. These conditions were perfect for granting constituent populations greater political power and autonomy within Austria-Hungary. So long as groups were working against Russia and Russian interests, they were permitted to go about their business.

So it was that Russia traded battlefield success for social stability. The empire was teetering on the brink of revolution, and when workers and soldiers revolted in Petrograd, the Tsar abdicated his throne. He was replaced by a

Soviet-friendly government led by Alexander Kerensky.

This could have been the end of Russia's problems. Seeking to follow up on victories in 1916, however, and eager to propitiate military committments to France and England, Kerensky pushed the Russian military further. Despite making some progress at the beginning of an offensive operation, when the Germans and Austro-Hungarians counterattacked and the Russians began taking heavy casualties, the offensive halted, then turned into a rout. Rather than unifying his country and quieting social unrest as Kerensky had hoped, the military failure resulted instead in the total collapse of Russian morale.

By June of 1917, moderate socialists declared the “Ukrainian People’s Republic” in Kyiv. In October of 1917, Kerensky's government collapsed, and he was forced to evacuate in front of Bolshevik forces. Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, bringing Russia's role in WWI to an official end.

Social Background

Ukraine experienced a wave of nationalist sentiment during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many Ukrainians believe that this understanding of themselves as Ukrainian dates back to their national literary and artistic icon, Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko wrote in Ukrainian in the mid-19th century about a Ukrainian nation. Publishing in Ukrainian was forbidden in Russia then, as was doing anything that could be construed as advocating for autonomy or independence.

A counter to the “Ukrainians were waiting for a hero to unite them” narrative can be found with Russian historians, who claim that Ukrainian nationalism (like the language) was an invention of the Austro-Hungarians, a 19th-century example of

one nation attempting to destabilize another. On its face, it sounds reasonable—Russia has distinct ethnicities, and using them as a lever to undermine Moscow's authority would be a brilliant plan. It's also what the Russian empire did with the Kingdom of Serbia, which helped lead to WWI.

There are problems with the Russian reading of history. If Austria-Hungary invented Ukrainian in the mid-late 19th century, then why did Russia ban Ukrainian in the early 19th century? Why was Taras Schevchenko's poetry, written in Ukrainian, perceived as a powerful tool of subversion to Russian interests? One can't "invent" a language overnight, nor can one compel people to read or speak a language in sufficient numbers to make rebellion, resistance, or alternate identities feasible. The popularity of Shevchenko's poetry and the threat with which it was viewed by the Russians offers powerful testimony against some Russians' claim that Ukraine was a Russian-speaking part of Russia with no sense of itself as having a history or culture separate from Russia.

Furthermore, Austria-Hungary is rarely mentioned in histories as a net exporter of intrigue—the empire's strengths included administration, bureaucracy, and multiculturalism, but its weaknesses included modern force projection and subterfuge. There was no legion of Austro-Hungarian spies flooding into its neighbors to undermine or destroy native sovereignty.

Still, there is some truth to the Russian claims. Austria-Hungary did not have the same laws restricting publication of books in minority-ethnicity languages as did Russia. So the poetry of Taras Shevchenko was free to spread and germinate outside Russia's borders, in a way that it wasn't inside Russian-occupied Ukraine. The free spread of powerful anti-Russian ideas did, then, occur in Austria Hungary—but not because it was part of an Austro-Hungarian plan. Rather, anti-Russian ideas spread because there was a group of people, Ukrainians, with their own distinctive language and culture,

and it spread because there was a nearby nation-state that offered Ukrainians freedom of speech, thought, and identity, as well as political opportunity. Austria-Hungary may have given Ukrainians reason to hope for independence, but it did not do so deliberately.

Russia exiled Taras Shevchenko and denied that Ukrainians were a people apart from Russians, while referring to them separately as "Little Brothers" and banning the publication of any literature in the language most "Little Brothers" spoke. Still, the idea spread among Ukrainians that they were a group apart from Russia. This was true for Austria-Hungary as well. Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and western Ukraine all lay within Austria-Hungary's borders (to say nothing of Austria and Hungary).

Austria Hungary was great at letting people be themselves, but not as good at getting them to cooperate to defeat their neighbors, which is why that Empire isn't there any more

It is worth pointing out here that an expansion of this idea, self-determination, used so effectively as a tool against the Austro-Hungarians, ultimately resulted in the destruction of the British, French, Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires.

So while the Allies were encouraging western Ukraine (then called Galicia) to understand itself as separate and distinct from Austria-Hungary, the Austro-Hungarians (who had always seen ethnic minorities as entitled to their own languages and cultures so long as they did not interfere with governance,

conscription, or the collection of taxes) were permitting Ukrainian identity to germinate and spread in their own territory. Those western Ukrainians, who saw themselves as part of an entirely different nation that, historically, had extended far into Russia, cooperated with Ukrainians living under Russian occupation.

Political Background

At the same time that the Brusilov Offensive was breaking the Russian military's morale, wrecking Austria-Hungary's military capacity to fight, and outraging Russia's industrial population against the Tsar, many populations were preparing to declare themselves independent. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania all date their modern independence to 1917 or 1918.

The Allies – Great Britain, France, and (as of April 1917) the USA—were in a bind. Ostensibly supportive of Russia as a military ally, they were hostile to Russia's absolutist monarchy and what they perceived as its unenlightened social order. Supporting movements that promised ethnicities independent, sovereign nations apart from Russia would be in accordance with their ethical logic, but would also assist Germany, their enemy.

While the Allies were deliberating how to respond to Russia's political situation, Russia was engulfed in flames. Before the Allies could mount an effective campaign to support Russia's Tsar, he abdicated his throne. His successor, Alexander Kerensky, attempted to work with the Allies by continuing Russia's participation in WWI on the side of the Allies, and ordered an offensive that was turned back by the Germans, who then overran Ukraine and Belarus.

Aftermath

Ukraine's ambitions for an independent state unraveled swiftly after 1917. The provisional Ukrainian governments in Kyiv and in Lviv were both willing to work with the Germans at first. That changed when they learned that Ukrainian independence was not part of Germany's plans for the region, and Germany began cracking down on Ukrainian politicians and nationalists. If Imperial Russia was unable to contain Ukraine’s ambitions for a State, several German divisions had no chance. Nationalism continued to spread, and while the minor German occupying force was enough to enforce a superficial subjection to German rule, it also bought Ukraine time to organize while the Central Powers fought it out with the Allies. It wasn't enough: after Germany’s defeat in 1918, a republic in the West of Ukraine was defeated by a joint French/US/Polish force. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian republic based in Kyiv was steamrolled by the Red Army.

Ukraine did not become legally independent from the USSR until 1991, and continued its status as a de facto Russian proxy until 2014. It is a strange accident that it should have taken nearly 100 years, but in fighting against Russia’s latest invasion, Ukrainians may have finally achieved that for which many of them had hoped 100 years ago—a real nation of their own.

Against NATO: The Other Side of the Argument

Since 1989-1991 when every country in the USSR or the Warsaw

Pact (save Russia) jumped ship at the earliest opportunity, reasonable people have asked the question: why does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still exist? This essay represents an attempt to understand basic criticisms that exist across the Western and non-Western political spectrum—to take them at face value, and examine them in good faith. The author of this essay believes in the necessity of NATO—its goodness, in fact—so it is an attempt to see things from another perspective.

Speaking with people on the right and left who argue against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, one encounters two different critical methodologies that arrive at the same conclusion. This is how Americans who support former candidate for US President Bernie Sanders or current presidential candidate Dr. Jill Stein could find common ground with Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson, Republican candidate Donald Trump (and former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates). It's also how Americans can find common ground with Russian nationalists, Chinese nationalists, and far-right groups across Europe.

Jumping into a comparision between the two groups' methodologies requires some minor simplification. I don't think this veers into oversimplification, but then, as I view both arguments against NATO as insufficient, that shouldn't be surprising. The motives of the left and the right are very different. As such, their criticisms have different moral weight, and require different types of justification to make sense. The left and right are not "the same" for reaching similar conclusions about why one should not support a European Cold War alliance, but their conclusions do happen to agree. That's important.

Conservative NATO skeptics tend to bring two types of criticism against the organization. The first draws on skepticism over globalization and alliance, and is not unlike the “States Rights” argument one often encounters among this type of thinker. These people view NATO membership as a concession of US sovereignty and agency. Taking part in a mutual defense pact means the US having to defend *other countries* in ways that run contrary to its own interests. The US loses more than it gains from a military alliance with Europe. The second describes the problem in financial terms: the US cannot afford to spend the money it does on NATO, that money would be better spent almost anywhere else. This second source of concern is similar to the first in that it assumes that the US is somehow being cheated by participating in the alliance—out of sovereignty, agency, or money.

NATO as of this article's writing, from Wikipedia (NATO countries in blue)

NATO skeptics on the American left are less concerned about advancing “US” interests, and more interested in expanding a world where people can live free from war. To this type of thinking, the US is itself a source of much or the dominant piece of aggression in the world, and as NATO is subservient to US influence, it should be diminished. The hypothesis here is that a smaller or non-existent NATO would inevitably lead to a more peaceful world. People tend to live harmoniously with one another, much moreso than nations, and reducing any nation-state agency is to the good. This type of thinking also leads people to advocate for the reduction or outright destruction of all nuclear weapons. From this point of view—the humanist or humanitarian—the stronger and larger NATO is, the more likely war becomes.

Leftist criticism of NATO spending resembles conservative criticisms, with both claiming that the money spent on defense could go elsewhere. Whereas conservatives tend to prefer that money spent on alliance flow instead to grow US military capability, liberals or progressives would prefer that money to be invested in education, infrastructure, and science, both domestically and overseas. This leftist tends to believe that lack of education or transportation leads to misunderstanding and violence, and that were everyone to have the same basis of understanding and knowledge, wars could be prevented.

Another possible anti-NATO stance comes from countries hostile to Europe. Countries that would prosper from NATO's wane (China, Russia, etc.), which correctly assess that a militarily unified Europe checks their own territorial or economic ambitions, are natural enemies of NATO. These countries view any alliance of which they are not a part as something to be diminished or destroyed. In a few cases, like that of Serbia, whose territorial ambition NATO buried in the 1990s, hostility could also represent lingering resentment toward having suffered military defeat. It is worth pointing out that people who refer to Serbia as "Yugoslavia" are, as a rule, almost always anti-NATO along these lines.

The final perspective hostile to NATO comes from within the US military establishment. This criticism tends toward the conservative: defense industry spending is a zero-sum game. A country only accumulates so much capital, and conservatives believe that investing in alliance or partnership wastes that capital. While the motivation in this case is financial, the criticism manifests itself as political: these skeptics focus on the possibility of fighting war at the tactical level,

independent of strategic considerations, or the diplomatic minutia of whether Russia was somehow tricked or deceived by NATO's expansion. In all cases, the argument by people like Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-48) ends up being reduced support for NATO. This amounts to tacit or explicit acceptance of non-Western agendas.

Across the spectrum, people who have criticisms of NATO should not be viewed as necessarily hostile to American, European, or Western interests. While that is certainly the case in a few circumstances, for the most part, criticisms of NATO end up being reflections of the West's failure to translate its prosperity into a model that is sustainable in the rest of the world. As few places outside the US and Europe have experienced lasting prosperity under Western models, it's difficult for the West to dismiss criticisms out of hand.

In the US and in Europe, hostility toward NATO should be viewed as a failure on the part of NATO to communicate its purpose effectively. If NATO and the US were able to describe how and why, specifically, Europeans and North American participants benefit from the security arrangement, it seems unlikely that any morally and logically humanistic citizens of Western countries would see meaningful opposition to NATO, save on the absolute fringe. On the fringe left, people wish to weaken the US and Europe following the hypothesis that strengthening all non-European countries would lead to an increase in global justice. On the fringe right, people wish for there to be absolute US or European power, and see alliances between the two as contrary to the interests of each.

If you believe that peace and prosperity for all humans

require a weaker Europe and USA, you see NATO as a problem. If, on the other hand, you believe the USA or Europe should be absolutely powerful, NATO appears wasteful at best, and a threat to your sovereignty at worst. I think you're wrong—but I understand your position.

Last Week This Week 8-28-16

Wrath /ræθ/ ***noun***

1: strong vengeful anger or indignation (chiefly used for humorous or rhetorical effect)

2: retributory punishment for an offense or a crime: divine chastisement

On WBT

Adrian writes about how deep war memories go in today's Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine

Another one by Adrian discussing the legacy of the British retreat at Dunkirk and its possible modern corollary—Brexit

Editor's Recommendations

American Politics

Charles R. Pruitt writes on how politics is gutting the equalizing institutions that at one point made the American Dream seem more than a myth: public Ivies

Big brother watches Baltimore and Big Business reaps the

bounty, reported in Bloomberg

World Politics

Piece by Anne Applebaum in New Republic that bears revisiting on Ukraine

Wired peers inside the clandestine world of Soviet cartography

A deeper look into Russia's well-oiled propaganda machine

Military

SEAL Team six and a man left for dead

History

The story of the East India Company, the original corporate raiders and a private empire unto itself

Sports and Politics

Old but good during run-up to NFL season and a propos patriotism and the Colin Kaepernik pseudo-scandal

Yuppies

A viral video of yuppie privilege becomes a Chicago neighborhood walking tour

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Thoughts on the Zombie Apocalypse

A piece about who finds zombie narratives compelling and why.

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.

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.