The Hundred-Year Itch, or Remembering The Great War

Here are some facts about

The Great War. It started in 1913.

We know that from books.

and the scarred nobles

grandma met in the deli

off 23rd and 8th,

Ich hätte gerne eine Bratwurst

they'd say, eyes scared red.

It was my fault; I must admit,

quanta exist in different places and

in different times;

some have been in my brain,

and also in Hitler's old brain

the war's most famous vet.

Not quite Afghanistan; still, his war

and my war was the same,

A vicious trick,

Russian saboteur

made disasters, it’s true,

walk with me here:

the Soviets invade in 1979.

Great Britain joins France

as the Marne collapses,

a wet snowdrift, over-heavy

in 1914. Add the numbers.

We surround ourselves with stories,

these fluid lines always converge.

Remember that line, the human

marching through town, shrive-faced,

boots laced tight, cap perched on his

kiss-me forehead, rifle shouldered,

we’re gonna beat the Hun—

there’s another line, now, 451AD,

Attila plundering across the plain,

stopped by whom? The Roman? No—

Aetius heads a motley crew of Frank

and Gaul, Suebi, Goth and Visigoth,

and *Saxon*! Yes, the Germans saved

the West from Hunnic rule!

Until—it always comes around to this,

that boy marched home again

some years after the great siege,

at Verdun, Ypres, or Somme;

really it doesn’t matter.

Siege used to mean sit, but he won’t;

not without his boots and cap,

all that chipper stuff gone,

he’s been unseated, the siege lifted

his mien took on a leaner slant,

suspicious eyes for prying words

could not prepare a waiting world

for what came next.

Plenty! Champagne *avec vous*

on all the quays and ways

of Venice, Paris, Bruges;

Sur la table, Monsieur?

If you weren’t there, you can’t know,

and he wasn’t. All there.

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When will war weary of me. Woeful wight,

wailing across the width of destiny,

I sprawl comfortless in a rancid hole,

a thick cloth great-coat stiff with sweat and grist

my second skin, then, for a skull, some tin

riddle: helmet, brain-pan, will you sit still?

The unfrozen mud’s alive, the stench, strong,

rat I’d say, someone’s let them in. Writhing,

muse for a Rosenberg, a whole den’s worth:

and that’s a good day, without bullets, bombs,

or the whistling artillery storm—

the rain of steel shrapnel, cutting like wind

across Europe’s newly irreligious plain—

flesh, it seems, has a its breaking point, splits wide

the human spirit spills, squandered, betrayed

amid the great gulf between my chilled hand

and the quiet, marble hand of German kin;

or British, or French—what odd clay. The flesh

grieves, parted by that vast, pitted waste,

unshrivened the filthy flesh yearns to be

whole again; compartmented, sufficient,

Unified. one man, one nation—one God.

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A great civilizing wind stirs on the plains.

Leaves cast off the towns, like trees,

the Supple young men march in step

all balled fists, full of boasting oaths

they stride, ennobled by a promise

of liberation, plunder, and rape.

The best of the land! This lot’s the best!

But someone’s pulled a cruel prank.

At the front, the sergeant calls time

with a note pinned to his back. It reads:

“Take my wife, she’s free.”

Below, a crude sketch.

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On a computer or smartphone,

an educated citizen

has just checked the market. It’s up,

cause for optimism, and sun,

and a feast fit for all the hounds

who prowl our sordid memory,

just looking for some sad excuse

to get me back out in the fury

Heroes fighting heroically during the battle for the Meuse-Argonne, which as everyone knows guaranteed peace for generations of Europeans and was a useful investment of human life and energy. Via US Army Europe Public Affairs

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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.