

Do Nazis Dream of WWII Dystopian Future Pasts?



The tired, simplistic, bargain-basement Cold War narrative of WWII sucks and it's time we got over it. According to my eighth grade history teacher, the USA won WWII by beating the Nazis and the Japs. If we hadn't beaten them, they would've conquered the world. That's how the story goes, and many board games and video games embrace it. It's comforting, comfortable bullshit. That version of history—the \$59.99 version where you get to kill the bad Nazi colonel or fight buddies multiplayer with antique weaponry—ignores basic facts that are widely available outside academia. Chief among those facts is the near-pathetic weakness of Germany and Japan heading into WWII, as well as the wholesale aggrandizement of our intervention and participation in WWII in ways that make us feel good about ourselves but also totally distorts how war looks and how reality worked and works.

Being honest about how WWII went down and what was actually at stake is important because history is important, and shapes how we evaluate our surroundings, our present, our acts and actions. This, as it turns out, is the thematic heart of Phillip K. Dick's science fiction dystopian novel "The Man in the High Castle." Dick, at his best when using strange and challenging scenarios to interrogate the relationship between individual and society, contrives an alternate reality where America loses WWII when the Germans develop and drop A-bombs, forcing us into negotiated surrender, occupation, and servitude. The novel—and the series—is an incredibly subversive take on how history operates, both in the logic of

the story, and in the logic of our own reality.

Amazon (not one to shy away from a sexy narrative featuring Nazis) has taken what was in Dick's hands an interesting meditation on the nature of perception and put together a mostly-faithful rendition that promises to entertain and educate viewers with a cautionary tale about what it feels like to live under a totalitarian dictatorship in America. [I watched the first couple episodes using my Prime membership.](#) And I was mostly impressed.

The series is set in a counterfactual past—it seems to be the 1960s—and begins with a shot of two men in an old-timey movie theater (the younger of which is Joe Blake, who promises to be a major character in the first season) watching a lousy piece of fascist, pro-status-quo propaganda. This is a subtle nod to you, the viewer of the show. Films go on to play a big role in the series, as well as peoples' reactions to film—in fact, the single greatest threat to the “Nazi” led reality is a series of subversive films showing a reality in which the Allies win, and the Nazis and Japanese lose. Both in Dick's novel and the series, this is an honest and accurate idea of how Hitler seems to have viewed narrative—a fact echoed in “Inglorious Basterds,” Tarantino's masterpiece that deals with similar themes. People watching the film of Allied victory in World War II are transported, blissfully and tearfully watching and re-watching footage, in moments that are reminiscent of our own reactions to this type of video on Memorial and Veterans Day, on the History Channel. Where “The Man in The High Castle” takes flight, however, and removes itself from just another nostalgic retread celebrating victory of freedom over tyranny is in its secondary or tertiary level, wherein the critique ends up being not of the Nazis, but of ourselves and our consumption of narrative history.

The series is filled with these double-scenes, moments that have special resonance on multiple levels, which is true to Dick's vision and the intention of his fictionalized world.

Things in dystopian Nazi-America are a bit shoddier than they should be, given the timeframe. There's a great deal of factory labor that's put front and center in the series as part of the economic backdrop to the Nazi-occupied society, and much of the show feels like noir. If the Nazis had won, the show claims implicitly, things would be worse in America than they are today.

But not that much worse. Noah Berlatsky noticed this same phenomenon, watching the show earlier this year. [In a review for the Atlantic](#), he found the show to be subversive in its claim that life would have been crummier, lousier, but not *fundamentally* worse than it has been for our real actual selves. There are no lines for food, no dead people lying in the streets. Gangs of Nazis and Japanese police chase down pro-democracy "resistance" advocates, but the people who keep their heads down and work hard are rewarded. It's not difficult, in other words, to imagine that if there were a group of pro-Nazi, pro-imperial Japanese agents running around today with films showing how in *their* reality Hitler and Hirohito won, our own government would be clamping down on their activities, and would view them as a direct threat. Would our real police be shooting them down on the streets? Well—people who are devout followers of that violent brand of Islam sweeping the Middle East aren't exactly treated with hospitality when the US security apparatus gets their hands on them.

Suburbia in Nazi-America is inhabited by Nazi party members and functionaries, but apart from kids having to wear silly school uniforms, things are about the same. Kitschy television shows the type of which people consumed in the 1950s and 1960s are on the air, but with a Nazi twist. There seems to be a functioning interstate system (Eisenhower is, after all, said to have been inspired by Hitler's autobahn, so this is not totally surprising).

In the Midwest, the truck Joe Blake is driving blows a tire,

and he gets help from a Nazi policeman who offers him help and part of a sandwich. During the exchange, Blake spots a tattoo on the policeman's arm, and the policeman self-identifies as a veteran of the war against Nazi Germany—then claims not to even remember what they'd been fighting for. White flakes are falling from the sky, and Blake asks the trooper what they are. The policeman cheerfully volunteers that "Tuesdays they burn cripples, the terminally ill... [they're a] drag on the state." In this series (and in the book), people in the south and Midwest have adapted easily and enthusiastically to Nazi rule.

The resistance, on the other hand, is made up of (frankly) irritating ideologues who rant about "freedom," which, presumably, is the kind of thing Moderate Syrians wanted in 2011, or the kind the West enjoys today—contextual freedom. "The Man in the High Castle" deserves huge credit for showing the resistance critically, and giving them real weight, real complexity, rather than simply having them be the sympathetic heroes to whom everyone is accustomed. Even though many of the resistance freedom fighters don't know what freedom actually is, it doesn't stop them from expressing willingness to die for the idea—to "do the right thing," as Joe Blake says. Thus the show subtly but undeniably reinforces the notion that perhaps the world we see today—the real world—is not as we imagine. This is not what our noble ancestors fought for.

Interesting side-note—in Europe, when you talk with people it seems like everyone's family was in the resistance in WWII. I've always found that fascinating, like, if everyone's grandparents were all in the resistance, how did the Germans conquer so much territory? But I digress.

So far, the series has decided to portray the Nazis and Japanese as brutal if thuggish occupiers, with an incredibly sophisticated and all-encompassing intelligence-security apparatus. The Nazis are recognizably Nazis—tite uniforms, imposing architecture, annoying habits, and superior military-

aviation technology. The Japanese, on the other hand, turn out to be eastern spiritualists who do martial arts on the side and are in the logic of the show (and the book) presented as morally superior to the Germans. Gone are the massacres they carried out against whites, Chinese, and “inferior” people in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere—in this show, they are unwilling puppets of the Germans, occupiers almost in name only.

Which is where the show’s deviation from the book and challenge to History as we know it begins to get really interesting—in the logic of the show, Hitler is the one who insisted on détente with the Japanese at the end of World War II, and who insisted on peace. Hitler, in other words, is the peace-bringer. In the world of the show, Goebbles and Himmler are jockeying to replace Hitler as the Fuhrer, and that’s seen as a bad thing.

Another decision that’s sure to bring the show in for criticism is its handling of Jewish characters. One of the main characters in the book (and thus far in the show) is a Jewish worker with artistic aspirations named Frank Fink. To begin with, he produces “degenerate” art, which is an odd confirmation of Nazi propaganda (he appears in the logic of the show’s world to be guilty of the thing that Nazis expect him to be guilty of). Then, he’s captured and presented with what appears to him to be a dilemma—save his girlfriend, or save his family.

And this is where things get really strange, in the show. The audience, at a certain point, understands that it doesn’t matter what Fink chooses—his girlfriend is already being tracked by the Nazis. A member of the resistance, Randall, warns Fink that if he gives her up, he’ll sacrifice his soul, a point that is reinforced to the audience because viewers know that whether Fink gives her up or not is completely irrelevant to her fate. The Japanese don’t know this either, though, so they threaten to kill Fink and his sister and her

family, for being Jewish. The Japanese claim not to be racists like the Nazis (as already described) in the sense that presumably their racism is directed toward other Asians, and not based on religious discrimination, so it doesn't matter to them whether they kill Frank or not. But they do end up killing the family—Fink's sister, his niece, and nephew, with an improved form of Zyklon-B gas. It's an accident, bad timing. The Japanese apologize, which is a neat bit of Holocaust-logic—this is how occupied people are treated, and especially Jewish citizens, as essentially expendable.

In return, Frank's character swears vengeance in the police station. "If you need Jews, you know where to find me," he says, enraged and embittered at the Japanese decision to kill his family (as they promised to do if he did not give over the useless information, which he refuses to do). The Japanese police chief looks him in the eye and says "I know." Because it's a totalitarian society! OF COURSE they know that he's Jewish, and where to find him. The governments know almost everything about almost everyone in their societies—much like the totalitarian governments imagined in 1984. It's also worth pointing out that the entire city where this takes place is under imminent threat of being destroyed by a hydrogen bomb wielded by the Nazis.

The decision to use a Jewish character to unpack complicated philosophical questions of causality and moral agency is dangerous and potentially offensive—maybe even certainly offensive. Because to do so puts the viewer in the role of Holocaust victim—and the dystopian future imagined by Dick (and revisited by this series) means, if there are still Jewish people alive in America or anywhere, that the Holocaust is ongoing. It also makes the subtle point that we like or should like Frank Fink, which implies that we ourselves are in a sort of cultural Holocaust, an annihilation of identity, which is an interesting thought experiment but one that doesn't seem like it's welcome yet in popular culture.

Another way in which the series may provoke controversy is that the basic premise—that America could have lost World War II under any circumstances—plays on bad history. Our narrative of the war overplays German and Japanese strengths while underplaying the Allies' economic and military might. Here's the truth: Germany and Japan were doomed to lose World War II in almost EVERY reality. Their military accomplishments despite that fundamental weakness were extraordinary, but testify more to the astonishing incompetence of American, French, British, Chinese and Russian political leadership and bad generalship early on than to any advantage enjoyed by the Nazis or Japanese. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the Germans have developed the Atomic bomb before America—we now know that, despite provocative History Channel specials to the contrary, the Germans were nowhere near the bomb, although one of their scientists (Werner Heisenberg) got about one third as far as the entire Manhattan project with a hundredth of their budget before crapping out due to bad math. On top of this, the fact that WWII happened at all is due largely to greedy and grabbing western politicians who fucked over Germany at the end of World War I, hamstrung earnest diplomatic efforts at rapprochement during the depression, and manifested an almost-willful desire to misunderstand Hitler's intentions in the mid- and late- 1930s. Knowledge of Nazi strengths versus Soviet and Allied strengths leads one inexorably to the conclusion that our dimension must be the only one in which the Nazis weren't crushed before 1943—it's a minor miracle they lasted until 1945.

An accurate characterization of Germany and Japan in WWII is not that they almost won—it's that they almost lost, over and over again, until finally they didn't not lose. That's the true history of World War II. We fucked around and fucked things up until we decided, kind of, to sort things out, then lazily and shittly continued fucking off and underestimating the Nazis and Japanese until we eventually didn't lose, as we were always going to.

Sorry mom's dad and dad's dad. It's the truth.

The real genius of Dick's novel, and of this series, is that there was and is a fascist threat in America, and it's going on every day. Where a physical dictatorship of Hitler and Mussolini (and, later, Stalin) was defeated, the result of that defeat was not freedom, actually. What we got is the corporate dictatorship we enjoy today, the anti-intellectual monopoly that began with LBJ and Nixon and the squares of Philip K. Dick's day. These happy Eichmann-types have been replaced by well-meaning, bright-eyed Hillary Clinton supporters, Jeb Bush (wait does anyone support Bush?) workers, and the hordes shouting Donald Trump or Ben Carson's name. They're people developing apps or leveraging synergies in New York City or Palo Alto, California in order to make a couple bucks peddling the escapist farce that a human life should be so easy and predictable that one must never encounter anything unpleasant or inconvenient. They're the social, corporate, cultural and technological fascists who will doom and damn our country more certainly than David Semel will direct himself into a box of unmet expectations from which he cannot escape by the beginning of Season Three.

End the series by (no later than) Season Two, David Semel. Don't you screw us again.

After indulging in a fantasy where one gets to rebel vicariously against Nazis in an alternate universe, viewers may consider a more modest rebellion of not supporting the shittiest cast of Democratic and Republican candidates since Rutherford B. Hayes. Otherwise, the future dystopia imagined in this series has already come to pass.

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

Malaparte's writing is powerful and moving, and despite his politics, it's difficult to see how this book would not have had a stronger and more sympathetic reception in the West, save for its fundamental conceit: wealth and strength cannot

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

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

Brad Pitt and the Myth of the Wehrmacht

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SPOILER



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

BACK TO NON-SPOILER

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

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

META SPOILER

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

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

META SPOILER COMPLETE – INITIATE SPOILER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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