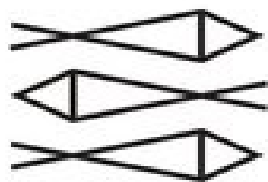


A STRANGER TO MYSELF

THE INHUMANITY OF WAR:
RUSSIA, 1941-1944

WILLY PETER REESE





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WILLY PETER REESE

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Preface](#)

[The Soldier](#)

[Polish Intermezzo](#)

[Russian Passion](#)

[The Winter War](#)

[THE ATTACK ON SHCHIGRY](#)

[THE FLIGHT FROM VOLOVO](#)

[ADVENT](#)

[THE NEW YEAR](#)

[Return Home](#)

[Russian Voyage](#)

[EASTWARD HO!](#)

[THE JOURNEY WEST](#)

[Lithuanian Landscape](#)

[The Copse at Rshev](#)

[THE TRENCH](#)

[SNOWY WASTES](#)

[THE FAIRY-TALE FOREST](#)

[THE GHOST WOOD](#)

[THE FISHING POND](#)

[Homecoming](#)

[The Russian Wandering](#)

[TRAVELING INTO SUMMER](#)

[THE BATTLE](#)

[Wandering into Fall \(1943\)](#)

[Uncertain Wanderings](#)

[FLIGHT](#)

[THE BATTLE](#)

[GYPSIES ON THE ROAD](#)

[THE STRONGPOINT MOMOSHINO](#)

[PAUSE](#)

[Notes](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

Foreword

For at least a generation after the conflict ended, the Western Allies sustained a historical image of the struggle against the Nazis in World War II that began with blitzkrieg and the Battle of Britain in 1940, then traced the campaigns in North Africa and Italy, followed by D-day in 1944 and the drive of Eisenhower's armies toward triumph on the Elbe. But little was known and less understood about the vast, misty struggle in the East between 1941 and 1945.

Today we have achieved a better perspective. We can see that the contest between the rival tyrannies of Hitler and Stalin was the decisive clash of the war, to which all else was subordinate. The United States made a critical contribution to the Soviet war effort, supplying aluminum, trucks, canned meat, radios, boots, and much else, without which the Red Army's advance to Berlin would have been difficult, if not impossible. It was the Soviets, however, who paid the overwhelming blood price necessary to defeat the Nazis, suffering the loss of some 27 million citizens against 1 million dead in the United States, Britain, and France combined. American and British ground forces killed some 200,000 Germans in North Africa, Italy, and Northwest Europe. The Soviets killed approaching 4 million.

There was never a low-cost shortcut to defeat a power as highly motivated, industrially mighty, and militarily proficient as Hitler's Germany. A long campaign of attrition was indispensable. It was fortunate for the peoples of the United States and Britain that this took place in the East. Implicitly recognizing Russia as the epicenter of bloodletting, the U.S. Chiefs of Staff made the decision to create only a relatively small U.S. ground army. General George Marshall wrote to Secretary of War Henry Stimson in May 1944: "We ... have staked our success on our air superiority, on Soviet numerical preponderance, and on the high quality of our ground combat units." Marshall might have added: "and on the willingness of the Soviets to accept the overwhelming burden of ground casualties."

A degree of sacrifice was demanded from the soldiers of the two tyrannies that never could have been made by those of the democracies. If Britain had been invaded by the Germans in 1940 or 1941, it is impossible to imagine, however bravely defending soldiers might have fought, that British civilians would have eaten one another rather than surrender. Yet that is what the defenders of Leningrad did from 1941 to 1942. Marshal Georgi Zhukov was probably the greatest commander of the war, yet his feats of arms were achieved by the exercise of a ruthlessness unthinkable in Dwight Eisenhower's armies. When Zhukov led the defense of Leningrad, he stationed tanks behind his own front not to kill Germans but to shoot down any of his own men who sought to flee. The Red Army shot 167,000 of its own men for alleged desertion or cowardice in 1941—42 alone.

The most important "if" of World War II is to consider how long it might have taken to break Hitler's dominion of Europe, if he had not chosen to invade the Soviet Union. From the outset, the creation of an Eastern empire, the pursuit of *lebensraum* for the German people in the vast expanses of Russia, was central to the Nazi program. Hitler told his generals that a single campaign would suffice to crush the rotten edifice of bolshevism. He was extraordinarily ignorant of the industrial power of the Soviet Union, and rejected evidence of its potential. When the Wehrmacht suggested early in 1941 that Russia was already building more tanks and aircraft than Germany, Hitler swept aside the claim, though in truth Axis intelligence estimates of Russian production were too low.

Any notion that Germany's generals were not complicit in Nazi atrocities can be dismissed after an examination of staff studies made before Operation Barbarossa was launched. German plans required

the systematic starvation of millions of Soviet subjects, to remove their grain and foodstuffs westward to feed the German people. There is no evidence that Hitler's senior commanders raised any objection to this diabolical vision. The purpose of Germany's war in the East was to enslave the Soviet people no more and no less.

Yet even the Führer suffered moments of apprehension about war with Russia. When Goering sought to flatter him before Barbarossa, asserting that his greatest triumph was at hand, Hitler sharply rebuked his marshal: "It will be our toughest struggle yet—by far the toughest. Why? Because for the first time we shall be fighting an *ideological* enemy, and an ideological enemy of fanatical persistence at that." And one day at the Wolf's Lair, Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia built expressly for the invasion, he voiced unease to one of his secretaries about what lay ahead: "We know absolutely nothing about Russia. It might be one big soap bubble, but it might just as well turn out to be very different." The German army, which attacked at three a.m. on the morning of June 22, 1941, possessed 140 divisions, of which 17 were armored and 13 mechanized, with 7,100 guns, 3,300 tanks, 2,700 aircraft—and 625,000 horses. In a rare invocation of any higher power than himself, Hitler concluded a message to his three-million-strong host: "May the Lord God help us all in this struggle!"

Within a week, the armies of Leeb, Bock, and von Rundstedt were deep inside Russia, sweeping aside the ruined divisions of Stalin, taking prisoners in the hundreds of thousands. Guderian's armored spearheads had advanced 270 miles. Staff at the Wolf's Lair asked the Führer why he had not troubled to provide even a pretext for his assault, far less a declaration of war. "Nobody is ever asked about his motives at the bar of history," Hitler answered contemptuously. "Why did Alexander invade India? Why did the Romans fight their Punic wars, or Frederick the Great his second Silesian campaign? In history it is success alone that counts."

Some officers on Hitler's staff suffered their first spasms of doubt about the rationality of the leader during those weeks of triumph in Russia. Perceiving victory, Hitler instructed his planners to prepare a blueprint for an onward march to British India. Thoughtful senior subordinates began to understand that their nation was led by a man who possessed no ultimate vision of a peaceful universe. His only policy was unremitting struggle, until there were no enemies left to resist his hegemony.

Private Willy Reese, the author of this memoir, joined the German army in Russia that autumn of 1941, just as the heady sensations of success were being replaced by stirrings of fear. The enemy resistance was stiffening. An awareness of the illimitable scale of Russia was seeping through the ranks. The first frosts of fall were harbingers of the deadliest foe of all—winter. Hitler had made no provisions for a long campaign, least of all to supply arctic clothing to his soldiers. When cold such as men had never known began to grip their bodies, to seize up their weapons and vehicle engines, in desperation they were driven to line their clothing with newspapers, for they had nothing else. Shortages of fuel, ammunition, spare parts, aircraft, and bombs started to assail the German armies, the absence of planning for long-term war production.

Meanwhile, on the other side, the men and women of Mother Russia were accomplishing miracles of endurance and sacrifice to sustain their own struggle. Whole factories were shipped by train beyond the Urals, machinery reassembled in the icy wastes of Siberia, where workers labored, sometimes without benefit of roofs, to build tanks and planes to resist the "fascist hordes." Those who weakened were shot or dispatched to the camps of the Gulag, where they died of cold and hunger in the hundreds of thousands. Raw recruits were driven into action unarmed, with orders to pick up the rifles of the dead. Stalin's commissars vied with Hitler's soldiers in mercilessness. When Russians retreated, they burned the villages of their own people, to leave no shelter for the invader. When Russians were captured by the Germans, many were killed out of hand, while others were conscripted as porters and auxiliaries for Hitler's legions.

The Germans made a grave error in inflicting barbarism indiscriminately upon those who welcomed

them, just as they did upon those who resisted. Many Ukrainians and other Russian subject people detested Stalin and Moscow's tyranny and were perfectly willing to assist the cause of Germany. Yet when they too found themselves victims of wholesale brutality, there seemed no choice save to resist. Through the years that followed, partisan war behind the front imposed mounting pressure on German supply lines. Attempts to suppress this by mass murder, hostage-taking, and devastation of civilian communities foundered on the Soviet peoples' extraordinary capacity for suffering.

War made Hitler a fantasist and Stalin a realist. In the first campaigns of 1941 and early 1942, Russia's dictator sought to direct strategy himself, and even to micromanage battles. He was personally responsible for many disasters. Yet by 1942, he had learned the lesson. Without sacrificing a jot of power over the Soviet people, he began to delegate military authority to able commanders—Zhukov, Konev, Rokossovsky, and their brethren—and to be rewarded with victories. These Soviet marshals were terrible men working for a terrible master. Militarily, they were gifted brutes. Yet perhaps only such people could have stemmed the Nazi tide and begun to roll it back. Stalingrad in the winter of 1942 was the turning point of World War II, while Kursk in July 1943 represented the last major effort by Hitler's armies to reverse the tide of defeat, with 2,400 tanks and 700,000 men thrown into a titanic encounter with 1.3 million men and 3,400 tanks of the Red Army, which the Germans lost.

For the men who fought on the Eastern Front, which often extended to 3,000 miles and more, the worst reality was that there was no escape save death. Germans and Russians alike, committed to action in June 1941, were expected to soldier on through the shocking heat and dust and mosquitoes of high summer, into the piercing colds of winter and beyond, with wounds offering a man's only chance of respite. German soldiers like Willy Reese were granted occasional leaves, but Russian soldiers could hope to see their homes again only when they had first seen Berlin.

On the Western Front, German and Allied soldiers would sometimes take pity on one another, not least by allowing medical staff to minister to the wounded on the battlefield. But in the East, mercy was unknown. An SS panzer unit woke one morning to find one of its own officers lashed to a haystack in the midst of the Russian positions. He had been taken prisoner during the night. A propaganda loudspeaker called upon the Germans either to surrender or see the haystack burn. They watched the haystack burn. Following that incident, the panzers' commander ordered that no prisoners should be taken for a month.

Atrocity piled upon atrocity. Mutual hatred created a clash of elemental passions, of a kind few American or British soldiers ever knew in their own campaigns. As the Germans were driven back toward their own frontiers, through 1943 and 1944, they fought with stubborn despair. They knew what their own nation had done to Russia, and what manner of enemies were the Russian people. They could anticipate with terrible certainty the fate awaiting Germany if Stalin's armies broke through. Here was the central motivation of Hitler's armies in the last phase of the war, when all hope of victory was gone, along with any belief in the omniscience of the Führer. Millions of soldiers knew that if they were captured by the Soviets, they could expect to die as slaves, just as Russian prisoners were dying in German hands—more than 3 million of them. If they fled the front, they possessed little chance of escaping the attentions of the military police, the *kettenhunden*, who would deliver them to either a penal battalion or a gallows.

Willy Reese's own mood sometimes approached hysteria, in a fashion widely expressed in contemporary letters from the front written by German soldiers. The singer Wilhelm Striener performed requests from *frontsoldaten* on his hugely popular forces radio show. A line in one of his most celebrated sentimental numbers ran: "Soldiers now crave sleep, not dreams." Fatalism, together with self-pity about their own predicament and that of their society, was the presiding theme among Hitler's people, as Nazi dreams of world conquest were supplanted by an expectation of annihilation.

From beginning to end, the Eastern Front consumed the vast bulk of German military resources. Britain made much of victory at El Alamein in November 1942, in which just three German divisions were committed while 180 Axis formations were fighting in Russia. On D-day, Germany deployed 5 divisions in the west, while 156 remained in the east.

To this day, Red Army veterans are contemptuous of the Western contribution to the war. Many of them remark that they were fighting for three years before the first soldiers stepped ashore in Normandy. German veterans profess an admiration for the Russian soldier, which they seldom concede to his Western counterpart. In particular, they acknowledge the Russians' prowess as night fighters. Even in periods of the Eastern war when no big battle was taking place, few areas of the front remained peaceful for long. Relentless patrolling, local attacks, and mortar barrages denied men more than a few hours' respite from bloodshed, month in and month out. The only respect in which Germans found Russia a more tolerable battlefield than Northwest Europe was that the Soviets never deployed airpower on the same scale as the Anglo-Americans.

Hardly any Germans survived the Eastern Front unscathed. Like Willy Reese, most soldiers suffered wounds and disease that removed them from combat for a few weeks. Then they were sent back. Many were dismayed, on reaching the front, to find that the consolation of comradeship, fighting alongside familiar and sometimes beloved companions, was lost. Former companions were gone, most of them dead. Only those possessed of the deepest reservoirs of will and resilience, as well as luck, could endure. More than a few men found it easier to die than make the effort to survive.

The Eastern Front in World War II is likely to remain the greatest and most terrible military experience in human history, because it is mercifully hard to imagine that it will ever be matched. Never again, please God, will 6 million and more human beings find themselves locked in blood and embrace for four years, amid such extremes of climate as prevailed in Russia. The men who came home from the East were scarred for life by what they had seen and done, as was Willy Reese. Soviet veterans, eking out pitiful pensions, are today deeply alienated from their own society. They feel that what they suffered for their country is unappreciated. Indeed, the new Russia seeks to banish the memory of the Stalin era. Red Army men have a bitter saying: "It would have been so much better if the fascists had won—now we might be living like the Germans."

When Willy Peter Reese returned from the front, he wrote about his experiences with the heat and enthusiasm of an aspiring author. He was sent back only to die at the age of twenty-three. Elderly Wehrmacht soldiers, in their turn, must pass their declining years in the knowledge that they served the cause of the world's most terrible tyranny, in a struggle that ended in defeat. This helps to explain why far fewer soldiers' memoirs have been published in Germany than in the United States and Britain, and why those that exist are important historical documents. They record an experience far beyond anything our own democratic societies have known. We should value their lessons accordingly. They stand as testimony to the extraordinarily privileged universe we inhabit today.

MAX HASTING
Hungerford, England
January 2000

Preface

*We are war. Because we are soldiers.
I have burned all the cities,
Strangled all the women,
Brained all the children,
Plundered all the land.
I have shot a million enemies,
Laid waste the fields, destroyed the churches,
Ravaged the souls of the inhabitants,
Spilled the blood and tears of all the mothers.*

*I did it, all me.—I did
Nothing. But I was a soldier.*

At the time Willy Peter Reese wrote this poem in 1943, he had been serving on the Eastern Front for two years. Pencils and paper, which were sent to him at the front by his mother, were his weapons against the craziness of this murderous campaign. He wore the uniform of a rank and file soldier in the Wehrmacht. He had four medals and orders across his chest, among them an Iron Cross, II Class. He didn't mutiny or run away. But he wanted to be a witness.

Now euphoric, now depressed, always tormented by lice and with an advanced craving for alcohol, Reese sets about turning his notes and memories into a single coherent text. In tiny handwriting, using every square centimeter of the page, he writes whenever he can, often by the light of his cigarette, he crouches behind his gun. Repeatedly, he gets into arguments with the other soldiers about the single lamp. On the run from the Red Army, though sick with hunger, he saves his letter paper and leaves the butter behind. "That's superfluous, but writing I need to live." In his diary, which he later uses as a source for his manuscript, he notes: "The only thing that gives me a personal will to survive is my duty to express this war, and to complete my fragmentary works."

He did it. On home-leave at the beginning of 1944, he types up 140 pages on thin A-5 sheets. He is just twenty-three years old, and nothing like the young man who was drafted into the Wehrmacht at the beginning of 1941. The civilian Reese writes poems and plays, draws, composes music, delights in nature. He corresponds to the point of caricature with the image of the German "Dichter und Denker," the poet and thinker he feels himself to be and would like to become. Two years after being drafted, when the Wehrmacht is on the retreat from the Red Army, the sensitive youth, who was nicknamed "Pudding" by the young stalwarts at school, has become a dull veteran: "Who were we?" he asks. "Spiritually ravaged—nothing but a sum of our blood, guts, and bones." A Schongeist seeking comfort in the bottle, and mocking himself as a "genius on distalgesics." But he remains a scrupulous chronicler of his own decline. He writes down what millions of Wehrmacht soldiers have suppressed and remained silent about.

"I'm collapsing under so much guilt—and I'm drinking!" he complains in September 1943, as his unit, fleeing the Red Army, lays waste the land, blows up factories, enslaves the people, destroys the harvest, and massacres the animals. A little later, on a chaotic transport into the town of Gomel, he describes how the boozy *soldateska* of the master race make a Russian woman prisoner dance in front

of them. They grease her breasts with boot polish. When a woman and her cow are shredded by a land mine, he confides to his diary that he and his comrades had “tended to see the funny side of the situation.” By now, Reese, in some situations at least, much more closely resembles a different cliché than the thinker and poet: that of the German occupying soldier in the East.

His “Confession,” as he subtitles his manuscript, leaves no room for the myth of a squeaky-clean Wehrmacht, misled and misused by a criminal Nazi clique. But it leaves plenty of room for sympathy with the fate of the mass of German soldiers who were on the side of the culprits, while themselves often being victims. Even in Hitler’s war in the East, which was so manifestly criminal, there is not always black and white, not always a clear distinction between good and evil. The scale of the action is so vast that the single man—his pain, his guilt, his experience—is almost invisible.

Reese makes this war understandable, by precisely and soberly describing what happens to him. Even if he can only see a tiny portion of the whole, the character of the campaign shows itself—through and Reese’s capacity to find words for the unsayable. As when he writes of some hanged Russian who fell victim on some hunt for real or seeming partisans: “Their faces were swollen and bluish, contorted to grimaces. The flesh was coming away from the nails of their tied hands; yellow-brown ichor dribbled out of their eyes and crusted on their cheeks, on which the stubble had continued to grow. One soldier took their picture; another gave them a swing with his stick.” Here is naked, unmediated horror.

What we hear is a writer who describes the principal experience of his generation—participation at the front during World War II—better than almost any other. The sixty-year-old manuscript is not merely an authentic document but a literary discovery.

With his individual experiences, the soldier Reese shows how war destroys the soldiers who wage it. The sufferings of winter marches are made present to us. He gives detailed descriptions of the effect of frost on feet. All at once it seems perfectly reasonable that a soldier, frustrated in his effort to pull the boots off the body of a Red Army soldier who had frozen in the snow, ends up sawing through the dead man’s lower thighs, and then standing the boots with the stumps in them next to the cooking pot by the fire. “By the time the potatoes were done, the legs were thawed out, and he pulled on the bloody felt boots.”

As unsparingly as Reese writes about the chopped-off legs, so also about the amputation of sympathy. Humanity doesn’t disappear overnight, and it never disappears completely. It is lost piece by piece. The “dehumanizing consequences” of war, which Ralph Giordano has written about, leave a trail through Reese’s text that widens as the war goes on. As he describes his military training in the Eifel Mountains, his lamentations still have the sound of self-infatuated postpubescent warbling: “The plowshare hurt the fallow field of our souls.” Soon it is replaced by the cold constation of the ravages done to a man at war, without any metaphorical ornamentation.

It persists in the only seemingly absurd wish to get back from home-leave to Russia as soon as possible. “In a sudden fear of anything kind and beautiful, we found ourselves assailed by homesickness. We longed to be back in Russia, in the white winter hell, in pain, privation, danger. We didn’t know what else to do with our lives. We were afraid to be home and now understood what the war had done to our souls.” Not long after the fighting begins, he starts to feel “a stranger to myself.”

Reese is no Nazi and, in spite of occasional prejudices, no racist either. He writes splendidly earthy hymns to the Aryan master race, saying, for instance, how “the round-cheeked plague of Browns / the West in its excrement drowns.” But he is part of Hitler’s invading army. He not only witnesses the

sufferings of the Russian victims but participates in the feelings of the German soldiers. He does not seek to prettify his own role. On the contrary: He admits and examines all the feelings that cannot be squared with his sense of self, but that become more mighty as the war goes on.

Along with the state of emergency of body and spirit in the war, there is still euphoria, pride, the feeling of comradeship. And sometimes the understanding of doing wrong is eclipsed by the adrenaline rush of battle. Reese, to whom nothing is stranger than being a soldier, writes: "Men who otherwise were perfectly peaceable characters felt a secret yearning for horrid feats of endurance and arms. The ur-being in us became awake. Spirit and feeling were replaced by instinct, and transcending vitality swept us away." Battered by waiting and uncertainty, the "committed pacifist" plunges into the fight. "I am proud of this dangerous life, and of what I have endured," he boasts to his friend Georg. Sometimes he even feels contempt for those who shy away from battle and danger—only to be revulsed by the change in himself. Between battles and bouts of drinking, he tries to rally himself, and insists that he believes in "what was irreducibly human, some angelic force that was stronger than everything contrary, a sanctuary preserving whatever was best and most characteristic of me across the gulf of the years." Reese offers not a balanced judgment from some moral high ground but the report from a participant, hurting others in a murderous war, and himself suffering. Much remains unfinished and ambiguous. And with that he describes the condition of a man robbed of a certainty.

For decades, no one was interested in Willy Peter Reese's manuscript. But his memoirs might have helped make the day-to-day reality of the common soldier during the war a part of the general consciousness in Germany. This has not happened yet, even with 18 million men serving in the Wehrmacht between 1935 and 1945. Jan Philipp Reemtsma, the patron of the controversial exhibition on the Wehrmacht, "Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation, 1941–1944," sees this as a consequence of a social arrangement that has long governed treatment of the Wehrmacht: "There was a sort of unwritten contract: You be quiet about your heroic deeds, and we'll be quiet about the crimes you perpetrated. In this way—with the exception of what was said with families—there was silence about personal memories."

The version of things in the minds of postwar Germans was determined not by the accounts of millions of witnesses but by a legend that began to be put about from the day after the war ended in Europe. In the last Wehrmacht report, dated May 9, 1945, the German soldier received a sort of absolution. "Loyal to his oath," he had "done unforgettable deeds in utmost devotion to his people." Some senior officers were sentenced by the Allied judges at the Nuremberg trials. But, unlike the SS and the Gestapo, the senior command of the Wehrmacht was not condemned as a criminal organization. In the licensed German press in the years after 1945, there were many reports about crimes perpetrated by members of the Wehrmacht, but most of that generation pushed aside questions about their past. The priority was the rebuilding of Germany; there was only slight interest in shedding light on the past. What there was interest in was a type of comic and adventure writing that dealt with comradeship, soldierly virtues, and standing the test of enemy fire—all of them subjects on which, from the point of view of the old warrior, no one else is qualified to speak. Nor did the bitter accusations of those children growing up in the '50s and '60s against their own fathers lead these men to open themselves, and come out with the experiences that had marked their entire lives. Dealings with the Wehrmacht continued to be dominated by politics, thus blocking the view of historical truths and for a long time obstructing the creation of any social consensus about the past.

Today it is an obvious and largely uncontroversial fact that what the Wehrmacht conducted in the East was an unexampled war of devastation. Part of what is needed to understand Reese's text is an awareness of the environment from which it came. The data about the German rampage in the Soviet Union defy the imagination: some 27 million dead. More than 3 million prisoners of war lost the

lives, more than half of those the Wehrmacht had in their power. In the territories of Eastern Europe that were under the control of the German armies, Nazi executioners did away with millions of Jews. It was the greatest abattoir in human history.

Reese responds to his situation as a soldier with powerlessness, fatalism, and submissiveness. Of course he is familiar with Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means. Of course he senses that he is being used as a cog in a giant murderous machine. The war behind the front line hurts him the most, because it was directed against defenseless people. In a letter to his parents, he says he would feel better as conquered than as conqueror. But he joins in. His feelings and thoughts and witness, which he doesn't want to relinquish at any price, don't lead him to insubordination or resistance. In one sketch he draws himself on the way to Russia with giant boots and a grotesquely magnified rifle; farther down on the same piece of paper is another self-portrait showing himself heading west with a book in his hand and a flower in his buttonhole. Some of the time, at least, the desire for a civilian life remains alive in him. But war to him is like a natural event, an irresistible, elemental force. For humanity, a world war was approximately what an earthquake was to a mountain range, he writes in a letter to his uncle. And so to him, as to so many others, despair in the political and military direction remains without consequence.

Shortly after the beginning of the war, in exile in London, the great publicist Sebastian Haffner estimated the percentage of the German population that was "illoyal" to the regime as high as an astonishing 35 percent, and rising. Haffner gives three reasons why this large number of frustrated and dissatisfied individuals was unable to mount any effective form of resistance: the extraordinarily powerful, unassailable position of the regime, the "non-revolutionary mentality" of the disloyal Germans, and finally "lamentable ideological confusion" and the dearth of new political solutions. All three arguments reflect Reese's position.

But they probably describe the thoughts of only a minority, albeit a sizable minority. The soldiers of the Wehrmacht comprised a straight cross section of the population. Among them were impassioned supporters of Hitler as much as resolute enemies. But all of them were desperate: It is evident that they urgently needed to find a justification for what they were doing. The Nazis' racist ideology provided one. Another possible way of making the barbarity tolerable was the recourse to a soldier's sense of duty, as was firmly rooted in the thinking of the war generation. "Help me, God," Reese, who otherwise was contemplative and self-sufficient, writes in his diary in hours of despair, "to say the yes and *Amen*, which I have so bitterly fought to achieve, and not to lose it, because out of negation comes the deep, dully burning pain." This seems to have been the way out for millions of people: a way of consoling themselves, of being able to stand it. From there, it is only a short step to the postwar silence that was meant to stave memory off.

When the war was over, nothing was heard of Reese for decades. Several thousand pages of letters and manuscripts were kept by his mother, as a shrine to her son's memory. In the course of the war some things were lost, but most of it she was able to save. She preserved his writing until the time of her death—not even thinking of publication. Reese's cousin Hannelore, who had looked after the frail old woman in the 1970s, inherited, along with some old furniture, a box of manuscripts. Years later she set about deciphering the pages, some of them handwritten and yellowing. In 2002—now well past seventy herself—Hannelore began looking for someone to archive Reese's writing, so that it wouldn't be lost when she died. She wrote to universities and publishers; few bothered to reply. Then, thanks to Stefanie Korte, a journalist on the staff of the German newsweekly *Stern*, for which I was working as a reporter, the vital connection was established that led to this book. One afternoon in December 2002, I spent several hours on Hannelore's sofa in Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance. There was cherry tart. The wonderful old lady showed me hundreds of poems, stories, and finally the war memoir. I sensed right away that I was onto something extraordinary. The following summer *Stern* published a long

reportage on Reese's war experience. The book appeared shortly afterward and shot to the top of the bestseller list. It was followed by a book club edition and then a paperback. In a matter of months sales had topped 100,000. "This book is a revelation," wrote the Cologne *Stadt-Anzeiger*, while the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit* greeted Reese's memoir as "gripping reading."

Not until the '90s and a new generation began to ask after the truth did the daily experience of an ordinary soldier become an openly discussed theme. Numerous collections of field post letters are published. But anyone reading them will see a disturbing incapacity to talk about what is experienced. "Many common soldiers¹ were rendered speechless by the grotesque reality of battle" is the conclusion of the Wehrmacht expert Wolfram Wette. What was needed was "the exemplar individualizing of a 'little man' in the uniform of a soldier."

Willy Reese is not your typical "little man." He is highly educated, a fanatical reader. He views himself as a poet and dreams of living in a free Germany. But his war experience is that of a normal draftee. And he was able to make a text out of it, in which this experience lives. He doesn't want to judge, he writes to his parents on Advent Day 1943, "but allow the facts and my experiences to speak for themselves." Much of what he writes in his manuscript is taken directly from his letters and diaries. He sets down what he experienced and what he felt. The literary form and ambition are unmistakable. Most of the details of his description are not possible to verify. It is possible that his report, written up from memory or with the help of sparse notes, may contain errors of fact. But it is beyond question that Reese wanted to show something absolutely genuine. He writes that war opens the "secret chambers of the soul." His manuscript enables us to penetrate them.

STEFAN SCHMITZ

The Soldier

The time of adventure began, but at first war was nothing but play. The summer sun seared the rocks and forests of the Eifel. Fields and pastures withered; the heathland crackled with dust and fire. Villages and hills⁵ flickered in the noonday heat, and dust from the troop exercise ground at Elsenborn was scattered over gardens and roads. Morning mists blew over alders and birch saplings by the roadside, there was a sultry steaminess in evergreen and broad-leaved trees, and at eventide the shadows fell far across the land. Often not a leaf or stalk stirred; only the crickets fiddled a little somnolent music. Then cool and silence blew soothingly abroad into the night.

I had been a soldier for some months and now wore the warrior's mask with assurance, irony, and patience. Never had substance and appearance been so far apart with me. Like a dream, obedience to commands, and the toughness of service hushed past me, leaving not a trace. I withstood the training like a sleepwalker. I walked in step and carried my rifle. Like a machine, I learned how to use a machine gun and a light antitank gun. An hour's worth of reflection was enough to bring out the sadness and despair, emptiness and fear, rage and pain of my days. I did not complain about being alone. I loved it, but sometimes I was overcome by feelings of helplessness and abandon. Something inside me wanted me to remain as I had been before my draft. Even that became difficult. All thoughts of the future fled as from a huge horror, and I was barely able to overcome the shocks of the soldier's life. But I got used to it, to never being alone, but always a stranger among strangers, separated from the others by spirit and soul, manner of life and beliefs. I went through the inevitable acclimatization but I never allowed the noise and the monotony of the day-to-day into my private kingdom. Before long I had recovered the confidence and irony to get through it without taking damage.

I lived in the dark. Ghosts lurked everywhere. Fear, disappointment, and a continual grief marked my sorry path. It was better then to believe in the most fleeting dreams than to be helplessly at the mercy of doubt and uncertainty. I couldn't live without the tiniest shimmer of hope. Everything on earth was growth and transformation, and as the surface changed, so the essence of a man ripened within. My dreams showed me pictures of my hidden evolution, even if I, dazzled by the days, was unable to understand them when, for a few seconds at a time, they showed themselves. I was asleep but it was precisely at such moments that the reality and nobility of life struck me most forcibly. In this way, for all my errings, I was able to find my way back to the man I had been before the outbreak of war. Everything was a sort of homecoming to me, even if I often failed to grasp the path and the destiny, and at times I was able to shape my own life as I pleased. I was made happy by the small joys of a soldier's life, a book, a glass of wine, some music, and a contemplative evening in the Eifel Mountains. Fate was often kinder to me than I expected and taught me to trust myself again.

Barracks life and drills seemed worse to me than war, just as the school of life took life more seriously than God and the world did themselves. Because now the metal that had been won from youth's ore was hammered to steel, and I had to serve as anvil. The platoon was made into a fighting unit, the individual to a cog in a machine, able to fight, to overcome hardship, to suffer privation, and to attack; willing to suffer and to die, prepared to obey and to do without for the sake of the war. And so the cannon fodder was brought up to snuff. The raw material was given its form, and I took the soldier's mask more seriously. I played my part in the great drama of assimilation, without any

spectators on the stage of my destiny. The phoenix burned, and I gathered up its lost feathers. I had too much time to be able to think of myself. My existence took place within me, mostly unreflected external events. But the change was in progress. I was becoming a soldier.

Mists like white smoke climbed out of the fields and meadows. I stood on sentry duty, feeling I was at the end of the world, in some foreign land, among foreign people. Evening came down out of a silver gate of clouds. The land subsided at my feet. Grass and shrub, near and far, slipped into shadow and haze, and scent, and silence covered the earth once more.

I set down my rifle and went looking for grasses and mosses. My boots grew wet with dew. I sniffed the fog and the chill of dusk, took off my steel helmet, and let my hair blow in the wind. It stroked my forehead, like tender hands. I was in love with every flower, every stone, and gave myself over to mere looking and listening.

The past few months had sharpened my eye for the beauty of small, simple, familiar things. I saw the world more alertly. The dust and gray of the city dropped from me, and I experienced the improbable beauty and delight of the world more than I ever had in the fullness and exuberance of the summers in Darss. A flower by the roadside was a kindness to me, a forest under the scorching sun, a spider's web pearly with dew, a butterfly, and the dance of midges at eventide, the plashing of a brook, and a lizard sunning itself on a hot stone. All these were experiences to me. The growth of wheat and bindweed, and poppy taught me to stand there with as much patience as theirs, and their innocence moved the masked man and soldier just as a repentant sinner might be moved by the comforting hands of an angel. But I was also painfully and burningly aware of the gulf that separated the dove, the shrub, and the tree from the war; and the soldier from all the love and blessings of the earth. I was no longer jaded and indifferent but found myself, like an insect with superfine antennae, shaken by the goodness and peaceableness of the earth. That was the only reason I was so grateful for the frost on the early blue mornings, for daybreak and dawn chorus. It was as though, in my sorrow and cruelty, I had to be reminded of the divine. No evening seemed so mild to me as the dusk after a hot, exhausting day of misery and soldierly torment. I felt the star-bright nights, the rapture of moonlight, violent storms, and tireless pattering rain more intensely than anything I had done by the sea.

Also, the simplest facts of human life—sleep, a piece of bread, a sup of well water, a kindly word—all these, after long disregard, became precious to me once more, and anything beyond the minimum I took as an unmerited kindness.

But that night I was taken by a violent yearning for my past. My sheltered youth pursued me with gorgeous scenes. There were many things I had not done, and the future sat in front of me like a raw block of marble. I could suddenly hear Moorish dances; I saw the stage, the dancers, I heard the Gypsy song and the keening voices of the girls, the magic and drunkenness of Dionysiac music, and I wept for my homeland and my personal fate. I left nothing out, and as I drank the bitter cup, I saw the purpose and the significance of time. Scenes, music, and stars wandered into my dreams ...

On the Hohes Venn, the heathland was ablaze. The fire chewed the turf under the tindery ground and threatened woods and fields, as it kept flickering up in new places. Foresters and soldiers were set to fight and quell it, and in the evening we were sent out to serve as firemen.

Smoke obscured the slope. The smell of burning flowed down into the valley; dust and ashes came down on our faces and shoulders. As the evening cooled, we climbed up. Dusk fell early. Smoldering fires played like will-o'-the-wisps on the forest edge. On a height, little flames flickered up like rows of lanterns, lit by dwarfs and heath spirits in the wind.

We ate our bread, looked out a camping site for ourselves on the soft needles between the pines, put up a screen of branches to protect us from the wind, and rolled ourselves into our thin blankets. One man kept watch. Very slowly the humus gave back the warmth of the bygone day.

I lay there a long time with eyes open. Stars glimmered in the branches, spun incredibly slowly over

the trees. Wind whispered in the boughs, dew fell, and the earth exhaled mist and moisture. So I found my home in the cosmos. I had grass and needles for a bed, the sky for a ceiling. No walls separated me from God and the weft of life. I lay as sheltered as in the heart of the world.

Some Walloon foresters came and sat by me. They talked about their work, their wives, about their work and the happiness of a conquered people that never understood the war and was happy simply to endure, now that it was over. At midnight they took their leave of me, as of an old friend, and left to protect their huts from the creeping subterranean fire. I was glad. I never saw other peoples' enemies; there was always a bridge from man to man in quick time. They sensed the peaceable man under my uniform. The only enemies I ever found were around me, and within me, in the self that was fighting against my destiny and imperiling me. So I thought, and fell asleep.

I woke shivering at dawn. The fire had gone out overnight. Fog and smoke mixed to a thick haze. We went back down to camp ...

We traveled to Monschau, and I breathed in the air of my old city. Life wasn't so bad; it was just me making it unbearable for myself. As if, in my obstinate hatred for war and military, I insisted on suffering from them.

At noon we marched past the lake at Robertsville, over hills and narrow forest paths, into the valley. A stream flowed under beeches and alders, trout flashed over the stones, algae shimmied in the current, and feldspar and quartz glistened on the bottom. We climbed steep slopes to a ruin, and there in the ruined castle we set up camp among wild fruit trees and blossoming shrubbery.

As evening fell, we scaled the wide tower, lit a campfire, and sat on the crumbling masonry, among ivy, brushwood, thorns, and wild vines. We emptied a small barrel of beer, smoked, and sang songs of soldiers' lives, love, going to war, and death, full of the melancholy-beautiful bliss of death that I once felt when listening to Haydn's Military Symphony. Flames flickered, stars danced, shadows covered us, the scent of wood, juniper, and mountain ash climbed up to us, the night wind burst on rock and bush, and the moon sailed through the dreamy night. The call of a screech owl resounded in the silence. We sat together as though resting from a long journey. In that hour I felt at ease in my company, one of many who shared the same destiny, the same garb. Though not necessarily of one mind, we were just adventurers abroad.

So I was a soldier for a few hours at least, even in my heart, and felt an early intimation of gratitude to life and fate, which taught me that many things could happen only in war and in the mask of a soldier. I felt the soldierly spirit that identifies beauty in the midst of sweat and pain and welcomes the hour of relief at the end of obedience and punishment. Secretly, though, what I loved was the feeling of returning to my self, which opened its gates. What I was responding to were romance, youth, and a whiff of a different freedom—never weapons, never war. My yearning always remained awake, and my homesickness unrolled its carpets over all things and experiences. I was still only at the beginning, and what was ahead lay in front of me as in a locked chest. Untrodden, the wide, wild world stretched in front of me.

I was still living in my own kingdom, thinking of the cosmos, the search for God, wild imagining, dream and grotesquerie, which, even in self-division, spiritual anxiety, despair, and questioning, I preferred to the soldierly world of masks.

Night rain whooshed down on our tents, drumming on canvas and leaves. The following evening we marched back to Elsenborn ...

The war games went on. We practiced with flags, blanks, and dummies, and our victory was never in doubt. We tossed our enemy aside. And the Wehrmacht reports ⁶ carried nothing but victorious encirclements, advances, and extraordinary numbers of captives and booty from the Russian campaign, where our destiny was pushing us. We served the imperative of history as specks of dust in the whirlwind and were privileged to participate in the end of our world.

So the introduction to my adventures ended with intimations, dreams, and signals whose interpretation I left to some future date and later forgot.

We returned to barracks in Cologne lean and strong and sunburned. Our posting might arrive any day. I took what the city could offer me: amours, books, concerts, plays, variété, and thoughtful hours in the cathedral. I went home, saw my friend once more, and drank the night away with my comrade. Uncertainty and expectation were features of my days. I didn't worry and felt strangely impatient for what was to come.

One day I found my name on the list. I was kitted out and equipped, said my goodbyes at home, and set off on my great Russian adventure.

And so the war began for me as well.

Polish Intermezzo

*At dawn we marched to the station, with pack, steel helmet, and rifle. It was raining, the weight pressed on our shoulders, and within us we felt the sadness of departure. The women on the streets had tears in their eyes; the girls smiled at us.*⁷

We were put on trains, and the great adventure began.

The train rumbled through the late summer, into the rising sun. It felt humid in our goods wagon. We sat on hard, shaking benches. On the floor was a thin covering of well-trodden straw. Our baggage was stacked in the corners; our blankets were full of dust and chaff. Rifles and belts struck the walls at the tempo of the rattling wagon, and the wheels sang the never-ending song of the rails. A hubbub of voices, song, card games, sleep, and laughter surrounded me, and I was afraid to reflect. And so I read without knowing what I was reading or understanding it.

We hunkered down in the doorways and saw the villages, fields, woods, and pastures of home slip past us, waved to the girls, and sang our songs into the rushing wind.

It wasn't much before midnight that we finally fell asleep on the boards, shaken about in our carriage, pursued by dreams, and we woke not long after. It seemed to have barely gotten dark at all.

For a long time I looked at the flat meadowland with its half timbered houses and scattered groups of trees. Sometimes the scenery reminded me of the Darss. Towns and empty expanses rolled by. We kept seeing birch trees beside the line, and yarrow, Aaron's rod, and grass bending in the wind as we passed. The same little wood seemed to come round again, the solitary tree, the field track, the road by the stream. The aspect of the landscape was slow to change.

I was indifferent to the noise and commotion of the soldiers in the wagon with me. I was quiet and calm, oddly equable. When I looked at the ordinary people outside, working in their fields and gardens, I remembered that I was traveling to Russia to fight, to destroy seed and harvest, to be a slave of the war, but then, out of danger and nearness of death, I would feel a lofty freedom and an almost pleasurable sense of life. I was overcome by homesickness. Sorrow at parting and loneliness made me sad, and of course I was frightened of what lay ahead. Certainly there was nothing familiar.

In spite of that, I wasn't wrestling with my fate. I yearned with a passionate impatience for whatever was awaiting me. I was still young enough to desire anything new, to relish the excitement of the journey, and to intoxicate myself with dreams and fantasies. I didn't think much of death and danger; distance pulled me toward it. The array of what I saw outside and the atmosphere of our departure filled me with an unspecified joy. Melancholy recollections mingled with stoicism toward the present; worry and grief with a boisterous pleasure in being alive. I felt as unhappy and consumed by bliss as if I were in love.

And so I entered the magical space of adventures. It was the beginning of a long journey.

The next night also passed without sleep. It was very early in the morning⁸ when we crossed the border into conquered and once more partitioned Poland. Flat country and distant hills characterized the sparse scenery. Stubble fields with shocks of corn, pastures with the drying hay from the last mowing of the year, small villages, and low, functional houses, wide streets, and neglected gardens filled in the space between the cities: Łódź, Kraków, Katowice ... Barefoot women went about their work, with kerchiefs tied over their dark hair, and skirts bleached to some indistinguishable color by

the sun. Ragged, neglected children begged for bread. They ran along beside the train, holding out their bony hands, or stood there accusingly, an image of hunger and abject poverty. Their pleas and their thanks sounded equally foreign to my ear. We had little enough to eat for ourselves. The poverty was strange to us too; it didn't resemble our native poverty in Germany, and we didn't really understand it. We were not yet acquainted with hunger and inflation; it was our first meeting with people who spoke a different language, with a different attitude, another purpose.

I saw no enemies, only conquered people. Only strangers. No path led to their souls and spirits, and from the moving train I had little sense of their day-to-day existences, their happiness and their grief. I did nothing and didn't reproach myself. I was just tired, pale, and I dropped off from time to time.

We stopped in Kraków. At midnight I was standing sentry on the rails. Over me sparkled innumerable pallid stars. A yellow moon appeared between loose clouds, turned a deep orange, and sank in a gory red. Barely a signal, barely a faraway light shone to me in the dark. I shivered, and my eyes were dropping shut.

We traveled onward.

In the morning we reached Jaroslaw, the new frontier town on the San. We piled out.

September sun lay on the platform of the little station. The Russian Empire began on the far side of the river ... I sat down on a stack of boards, felt the warm sun in a tired way, and watched Russian POWs at work. Bearded faces, unkempt hair, empty eyes, and ripped uniforms all presented an image of sorry homelessness. Every movement that was performed was dull and slothful, and the guards swore and hit out with sticks and rifle butts. I felt no anger at the ill-treatment of these helpless men and no sympathy either. I saw only their laziness and their obstinacy; I didn't know yet that they were hungry. I was glad we had stopped moving for the moment and that we had another interval of time. I was completely preoccupied with my own destiny ...

We picked up our knapsacks and marched to the barracks. Other houses with lofty windows behind dusty trees were redolent of an atmosphere of soldiery, service, and ugliness. We moved into bleak little rooms, with cockroaches, dust, and hunger. There our shared privation and distance from home made us into comrades. Secretly, though, everyone remained isolated. There were no bridges from one man to the next.

We marched out every day. With knapsack, coat, and blanket roll, with storm pack, bread sack, and rifle. Singing, we marched through Jaroslaw and followed the tarred roads into the outlying woods and hills. With singing and humor we battled through our exhaustion. We had to practice marching because at the time that was the only task we expected to be given during this war. We marched in rain and shine, and thunderstorms broke over our heads. We draped canvas sheeting about us, the water dripped off our helmets, and our rifles sprouted rust like fungus.

I didn't often go into town in the evenings. It wasn't that it was strange to me, the towns of the world aren't so very different, and at that time I didn't have much of an eye for fine distinctions. Jaroslaw was a wretched caricature of a small town in Germany, without any amenities except a little library and a tolerable schnapps in some of the bars. I didn't enjoy being a soldier among a conquered people. I felt strange and excluded; I felt ashamed of my presence there and often felt responsible for the people's misery, as when an unmerited hatred seemed to strike at me from all directions. I bought cake and fruit to supplement the sparse diet, sometimes played the piano or read in the soldier's quarters, where we had a wildly varied selection at our disposal; then I would return home at night with my companions through the darkened town. We sat in smoky bars and drank the garish and syrupy schnapps. Later on we would stare at girls and women, but there were no encounters. I wasn't immune to the tender blond or Gypsyish charms of Polish women, but I was too ashamed to go after love in the midst of this foreign people, and the squalid brothels only disgusted me. Eros took other paths, in our jokes, and everyone who told stories became his own Don Juan or Casanova. Only self-

restraint and collective living could master what lay ahead of us. And so we lived like monks.

Usually I was on my own in the barracks reading room, and I wrote my letters, aphorisms, and poems and tried my hand at eerie tales. From my fables and fantasies I increasingly withdrew philosophy and problems. Often serious conversations would go on till deep in the night. We were looking for some principle or backbone to help us bear our fate.

Every day the tormenting emptiness within me deepened, like the grief of a homesick child, while at the same time I ate the bread of what was to come and painted frescoes of my future.

I was a soldier in the same way I had once worked in a bank. I accepted my lot like a job I disliked and so saved myself some mental strife. At first every adjustment was difficult. But my spirit remained true to itself, and what I experienced wasn't wasted. But what I gained, the future had to confirm. I came to my senses more and more, and left to my own devices like a shipwrecked man on an island, I became ever more thoughtful and introspective during my solitary hours.

Broad awake, I stalked through the days of incipient destiny and soul-making. When the autumn wind bent the yellowing trees, when red foliage flew and the storm blew over the hills, when rain clouds chased in front of the sun and the distance expanded under the changeable skies, I felt again that heightened feeling of intoxication that once had been engendered by my summers on Darss. Now my yearning for those free times of wandering and growth became part of what I felt, a yearning for return to the familiar beauties of a world more my own. Every fine hour deepened me, homeless, alone on my own in the foreign place; landscape, tree, and shrub all acquired deeper meaning and freedom of purpose. My senses became acuter, I looked more consciously and tenaciously than I had before for what was great and enrapturing, and I kept coming across wonders and creations that made the separation easier for me to bear. An enigmatic whiff of the east, an atmosphere of barrenness, sadness, and hunger over objects and vistas gave the landscape a more potent force, and dreams and intimations supplemented the strange reality. Away in the east, the advance was continuing. That was all we were told.

In spite of that, our lives were changing too, and while wartime existence might make us skeptical about our souls, we were trying to adopt attitudes, masks, and postures that would be equal to the demands and conditions of what lay ahead. So each of us went within himself in his own way and mastered step-by-step his preparation.

At first there was the primordial circling around God. But the idea of God paled against the promise of destiny. I didn't want to be a weakling and lean against his omnipresence in my fear and need, nor leave my happiness and sorrow in his fatherly hands, accept my lot as punishment and mercy, and console myself with his sacraments and promises. With rare logic, I didn't want to recognize any commands that, as a soldier, I would be unable to observe, and I told myself even then that I wasn't responsible for anything that I lived, thought, or said as a soldier, whether it was wisdom, experience, love, or death. My cosmos was now populated by angels and demons, and Jesus to me became more and more a prophet and less and less the Son of God.

But in a world without God, there had to be new forces that determined my standpoint and rooted my spiritual life.

The shivers of preparation blew through me, and all unknowing, I stepped into a heroic nihilism. So I thought.

Life was suffering. Death ruled the world. After the pain of birth, man's path led through sweat, anxiety, grief, fear, and hunger. Death was the only release; it took destruction to restore freedom and peace. It was a terrible thing to live in this world, in meaninglessness, viciousness, and godlessness. Better, as the Greeks said, never to have been born. The Flood and the end of the world were the only consolation; destruction was the final task of the seer and expert of our age. The last gods still needed to be forgotten, the idols smashed, love eradicated, procreation foiled, and life concluded. Ruins, di-

and ashes should lie there as plainly visible, as they had long secretly been forming the picture of the world. But to the living, it was not only a matter of being in this void without metaphysical shelter—in doom and dread, bitter irony and dance of death, laughter and torture. It was tolerating its frightfulness, and also to want this fiendish life as it was, to take it as it came, and to love it in its barren bitterness and corruption, to call it beautiful, and to live it powerfully to the end; to find pride in its gruesomeness, delight in its decay, enthusiasm in its devastation; to deepen the worst horrors with one's intellect, to live consciously and die coolly, at one with a reviled fate. There was merely the brazen inexorable necessity, Ananke, going her ways, over men and times as over grass and sand, grinding everything under her heel and at the same time alerting it all to a meaningless and godless existence. She tossed the church and the atom on a pair of scales, despised God and glorified death, and still bore fruitful blossoms in her soul: nightshade growth of time.

Only war could breed these thoughts, and they remained there, through all its phases and guises. In every crisis, it is to them the adventurer returns; from their humus his inner fate nourishes itself. My circling around God became an erring around death and void. There was no other way. I hoped, and I carried my stars, but they shone with a different light.

That was the spirit in which I wanted to go to war. I loved life because it was cruel in its beauty, appalling in its goodness, deadly in its fruitfulness, because our existence was a tragedy; birth, condemnation, and death were a liberating curse. I demanded roughness and danger to test myself in, a day full of toil and bitterness in which to purify myself. What I wanted was a transformation beyond consolation, dream, and refuge with God; and I found my pride and my greatness in wanting the carnival of killing and burning just exactly as it was; and to love it, and to stand in it without illusion, support, or belief; to laugh into the void and still be there, in the criminal pleasure of being cut adrift from gods and angels. I wanted despair for myself, and wounds, that I might survive them, and I felt strong enough to take up the fight with scorn, hunger, and rage. And perhaps all that was just the demented mask of man, who in the limbo of his destiny finds himself breaking down. I was given all the things I dreamed of. But I did not pass their test. I still needed to ripen to my fate.

The Indian summer faded away, autumn arrived, and the levels of the San rose. The bridge at Jaroslaw, dynamited during the fighting against Poland and now half repaired, was at risk. The river tore away supports and embankments; beams washed down the stream; the levee was undermined, and parts of it were collapsing.

We marched there in a fine rain, to salvage lumber, support what was still standing, and keep watch on the levee. On the horizon, Jaroslaw disappeared in haze and rain dust. Meadows, sodden pastures, groups of trees, and huts passed by. We reached the river at noon. Storm clouds, darkness, and rainbows menaced to the west; colorless sunshine trickled down onto the fields. The broad grassy banks had disappeared under a murk of clay-colored and dirty gray water; only bushes stuck out, collecting scummy bubbles in the mesh of their twigs. The spirit of the eastern landscape wafted toward us: melancholy, emptiness, expanse, a twilit mood, and as if to order, the remnants of the bridge obtruded into the oppressive scene of abandon and strangeness. Now I knew how far away I was from home. An unwelcoming country took me in, where I could not live, only die, or, like Ahasuerus, wander forever, a drifter, evicted, a ghostly shadow, an exile, wafted about by the choirs of the dead and the night wind off the hills, consumed by spirits and as lonely as at the edge of the world. The only way a man could live here was in tents, take them down, set them up, take them down again, always on the road in no-man's-land. And only the grave would set an end to yearning and suffering, fear and abandonment. Any notion of becoming had to be a grave error here; there was no adventure, no romance, not here. Only the year governed with its wheel of perpetual return; the soul lost its features, the wanderer his mask and his face. And so I entered the demesne of my new life, staggering from one contradiction to the next.

We got to work. From barges and rafts we laid new foundations, attached drifting timbers, anchored what was left of the props, spanned wires, and dragged earth and stones into the dikes. We scooted fearlessly around in the rapids, whirlpools, and foam. And by evening the bridge had been saved.

Railwaymen played host to us, and for the first time in a while we ate our fill. The moon dipped over land and water in its unreal light, and I breathed in the cool air as a portent of a better, finer life to come.

My notions of the future expanded. I had intimations and dreams. I felt curiosity, an appetite for novelty, for the strange and extraordinary, which kept returning and pulling life forward. Pain alternated with a bizarre pleasure in everything that went against me and seemed to mock me. I wanted the plumb opposite, the improbable, the impossible that didn't belong to me, and in this desire marked the beginning of the view by which everything was pure adventure, in either thought or experience. I drifted. I had let myself drop into the stream, and now I was waiting to see which plank would come along and rescue me, which skiff would pick me up, which coast would permit me to land. I referred to this as my passive adventurism: getting tangled up in dangerous and dicey situations and waiting to see how the knot might be unpicked.

Uncertainty, unfamiliarity, the imminent, the untrodden refused to allow any durable form to appear. A state of readiness was the most that might be expected.

New orders came, and we traveled on. I wasn't sorry to take my leave of the limbo, the way station of Jaroslaw.

Monotonous, mournfully beautiful country went past. Indian summer baked the fields, veils of trees and shrubs flamed in russet glory, and the grass withered. The sun rose in infinite silence and loneliness over seas of fog. Scattered farmhouses loomed up out of the distance. Ruined bridges and houses told of the progress of the war. The fields ran on endlessly; villages stretched along the hills. Children minded the farm animals. Roads led away into the distance, straight, straight, straight. Autumn dropped ever sadder colors onto the melancholy palette. Villages looked deserted, people like dream figures in a shadowy existence—as if, though long dead, they were still doing their work, under some mystical compulsion.

We got off⁹ at Fastov. I said goodbye to the train, and to everything I had ever known. The candle had burned down to a stump; it was like saying goodbye to life itself.

Russian Passion

Russia. Now the war began for us as well, and it was as though we were merely the latest to be involved in the ongoing crucifixion of Russia and its people. We saw only women and old people; the men had fled or gone into hiding. But even if we didn't believe¹⁰ everything the muzhiks told us, we knew, and we could see for ourselves and hear it and feel it wherever we went, that this people of so many mingled races had always suffered, that all through history its roads had been a *via crucis* that hadn't even merited a martyr's crown. Nor did we either, because we were cowardly before the law. Not only self-division, despair, humiliation, brutality, abjectness, rue, and bruising, as the poets said, constituted this suffering. The peasant in his poverty, in misery, degeneration, and slothful passivity, was condemned to idiocy and servitude: He bore his mute animal suffering under the czar, the knob of the landowner, and in the collective farm. He suffered from the climate, was duped, beaten, was raw material, learned to be cunning and cruel himself, and still suffered on into eternity. He stood on the bridge between Asia and Europe, in the twilight, on the everlasting Good Friday, and a hundred generations had only one face among them.

We saw the hunger and the misery, and under the compulsion of war, we added to it. The Passion took us into its territory. We marched.

Fastov. A vast plain unfolded outside the railway station, and the paved road led dead straight over low hills and fields. Straight, dead straight, that was the theme of Russia. Fields, corn stubble, and meadows slid past; only very rarely a tree or a house on the horizon. The sun glared; dust whirled up. We carried our packs and rifles and marched in loose file under their weight. At the very first rest stop, we sprawled onto the dusty grass at the side of the road, staggered up on the command to continue marching, and dragged ourselves onward. I started to fall behind. As evening fell, I would pass comrades insensible on the roadside, felled by heatstroke or exhaustion. A little troupe of us moved into a village, were allocated a barn, and lay down. We couldn't eat, barely drank, and slept in leaden fatigue.

In the morning, trucks came and saved us the agonizing march. We rode to Kiev,¹¹ were put with regiments of the 95th Infantry Division, the 14th Company of the 279th Infantry Regiment. And there I remained for the war. There my road began into the Russian Passion.

We spent one more night in Kiev. In the morning, before it was light, we set out and stood shivering on the road. For a long time progress was stalled at the bridge over the Dnieper. A keen wind blew over the river. Finally our columns moved across. Horses pulled the artillery pieces; a munitions cart with blankets and equipment, knapsacks and booty, traveled with each light antitank gun. At noon, when we rested, the field kitchen drove past the ranks and gave out food; the supply column was a long way back. The front was an unknown distance ahead. We heard that our motorized units were pursuing the Russians. That was all we knew, no names of places or directions. At night we set up tents or slept in houses, lying on straw and always tired.

Slowly but irresistibly we moved across the steppe toward the great adventure. Sun seared. Dust and sweat begrimed our faces, and the march and the road seemed never-ending. Low whitewashed cottages stood among fruit trees and wells, all of it lost in infinitude. Women in brightly colored headscarfs stood barefoot on the broad road, beautiful figures among them. We saw hardly any men.

We marched.

~~Our feet swelled up and hurt; our breaths came quicker and shallower till we were allowed to rest.~~ Every night was a relief. I felt an utter stranger in Russia.

We were given a day's respite. A white village in the midst of apples and poplars took us in. We could wash and sleep, wash our clothes, and fix something to eat with stolen eggs and flour. There were occasional beautiful simple houses standing in the bare landscape. But mostly they were squat ugly huts, in which four or six or ten people lived in a single small, low-ceilinged room. They were beam constructions, with daub walls, the cracks stuffed with moss, the inside roughly painted, the outside generally not. Their roofs were straw. A stamped earthen floor supported the great stove on which the inhabitants slept. Mice rustled in the straw and dust. There was a bench, a table, and occasionally a bed or pallet by the stove. Underneath it quivered rabbits, pigs, and the vermin that would attack us. Bedbugs bothered us at night, fleas broke our rest, and lice multiplied in our uniforms. Spiders, flies, wood lice, and cockroaches scuttled over the tables and over our faces and hands. The illumination was provided by an oil lamp. Sometimes after our arrival, the women would have lit the candle in front of the icon and pulled a Bible out of its hiding place and laid it on a little corner table, with artificial flowers. Above it were pictures of the Madonna and various saints, printed on gold paper and framed in wooden boxes. Some of the women wore crosses on chains around their necks and crossed themselves before meals. Otherwise they passed their time in sleep and idleness. The winter was empty, and there was little to do in the autumn. They lived on potatoes and sour black bread, usually kept a few chickens or geese, sometimes a pig or a cow. But they were strong and healthy. This was what they were used to, this was their life from day to day, and neglect, squalor, and poverty bothered them little.

We marched on.

Rain streamed down. We slithered over grass and clay, and the roads turned to bog. Snow and hail were carried on the wind. Winter set in at the beginning of October. The roads were bottomless, and we marched on from village to village. In Glukhov we stopped for a day, we slept in Kutok, and yet we had no idea where we were.

Fate drove us on, and we didn't know where we were going till we got there. We were not called upon to fight, the enemy was still far distant, but the march alone was sufficiently bitter for us. We crept on through the mud. Our artillery pieces and munitions carts bogged down; the horses broke down, were barely capable of pulling light loads. The supply column was delayed; we were no longer victualed. One after another, the horses collapsed and died or had to be put out of their misery. We replaced them with tougher Russian ponies, which we managed to capture wild or took away from collective farms. They in turn starved,¹² became scrawny and weak, the bones stuck out of their worn untended hides.

Our coats and blankets grew wet and moldy, had clumps of clay on them, and we could no longer get our sodden boots off our swollen, inflamed feet. The dirt and the lice gave us sores. But we marched—stumbling, reeling—pushed the carts out of the muck, and tramped on dully through showers of rain, sleet, and occasional night frosts.

Finally there was a little forest after the desolate plain, a few pines, beeches, alder scrub, not more. Beyond it the flat expanse began again. We spent the night with farmers who had been German prisoners in World War I. They were friendly and hospitable and complained about the new age in their country. But we could not make any comparisons.

Frost-reddened maples and lofty birches with their last yellow leaves stood in a dusting of snow. We hardly saw the beauty of the enchanting scenes. We were hungry. The cooks slaughtered cattle and pigs on the way and requisitioned peas, beans, and cucumbers everywhere. But a little midday soup wasn't enough to get us through our exertions. So we started taking the last piece of bread from

women and children, had chickens and geese prepared for us, pocketed their small supplies of butter and lard, weighed down our vehicles with flitches of bacon and flour from the larders, drank the overrich milk, and cooked and roasted on their stoves, stole honey from the collective farms, came upon stashes of eggs, and weren't bothered by tears, hand wringings, and curses. We were the victors. The War excused our thefts, encouraged cruelty, and the need to survive didn't go around getting permission from conscience. Women and children were made to go to the wells for us, water our horses, watch our fires, and peel our potatoes. We used their straw for our horses or for bedding for ourselves, or else we drove them out of their beds and stretched out on their stoves.

The country started to get hilly. The villages got still more wretched, and the mud got worse. Men and horses were at the end of their strength. The trucks and tanks of the lead units got stuck in the mire. The advance faltered. We moved into a village and rested. Slowly we recovered. We suffered from diarrhea. Our bellies were a ferment of swamp. We were disgusted and appalled, but we couldn't fast. Hunger hurt too much.

We moved in semipermanently. We drove the women out of their homes and pushed them into the most wretched of the dwellings. Pregnant or blind, they all had to go. Crippled children we shooed out into the rain, and some were left with nothing better than a barn or shed, where they lay down with our horses. We cleaned the rooms, and heated them, and looked after ourselves. We always managed to find potatoes, fat, and bread. We smoked makhorka, the heavy Russian tobacco. Otherwise we lived as well as we could and didn't think about the deprivation that would come after us. Kosmomolemyanskoye was the name of the village.

I fell into homesickness and pining. The extent of my life and thoughts never got beyond tiredness and fantasies of desertion, need for sleep, hunger, and cold. My star went on its predestined way. Beyond all love, I drifted in my Russian Passion. That I had once walked by the sea in a storm, that I had lived and dreamed: That seemed itself like a dream. I would give up God and my own humanity for a piece of bread. I had no comrades. Everyone fended for himself, hated anyone who found better booty than himself, wouldn't share, would only trade, and tried to get the better of the other. There was no conversation beyond the day-to-day. The weaker was exploited, the helpless left in his misery. I was deeply disappointed, but then I too had become hard.

We froze. At first there was a thin layer of snow on the road, but as it grew colder, the paths slowly became firmer. We were able to start marching again. At Fatesh, there was a thaw, and we were knee-deep in the soft sludge again. Then we froze, but there was no winter clothing to be had. Any woollen garments we found became ours. Blankets, scarfs, pullovers, shirts, and especially gloves we made of anything with at any opportunity. We pulled the boots off the old men and women on the street if ours were wanting. The torture of the marches embittered us to the point that we became impervious to the sufferings of others. We showed off¹³ our ill-gotten gains and with the impression we made with our pistol on a defenseless woman, who by ill fortune was a Russian.

We were oblivious to the way we were often given food when we set foot in a hut, to the peasants giving us their makhorka to smoke, a woman freely offering us a couple of eggs, or a girl sharing her milk with us. We still dug around in every corner, even if we let what we had taken just go bad later. We didn't want it; it was a sort of compulsion. Our commands kept telling us that we were the lords of the universe, in a conquered country. We had to go on; the front was still far off. No one asked us how we did it. Our legs ran with pus, the socks rotted on our feet, lice owned us, we were cold, hungry, ill with diarrhea, scabies, diphtheria, jaundice, and kidney infections, we dragged ourselves forward on sticks, rode bareback on horses, or gripped the sides of carts with frozen fingers, but we marched on.

Another village, another one of the innumerable villages we saw, and whose names we heard only to forget them immediately afterward. We got there in the dark and slept in a barn. A stove burned, but it gave no warmth. The straw was wet; our coats and boots were heavy. We lay down, freezing.

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