

FLORIAN SCHWIEGER

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“Loyalty gleaming, guns screaming”:  
William T. Vollmann’s *Europe Central*  
and the Memory of Stalingrad

I have no intentions of killing myself for this  
Bohemian Corporal

—Friedrich Paulus

In the early morning hours of November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1942 a small detachment of Russian tanks under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel G.N. Filippov rolled over the Don Bridge at Kalach. In the darkness of this late November morning, the German guards, who were under explicit orders to destroy the bridge in the event of enemy contact, mistook the Russian armor for their own. As they realized their fateful mistake it was too late. After a short skirmish the Soviet 26<sup>th</sup> Tank Corps captured the bridge and severed the aorta of the German supply lines at the Stalingrad front. A few hours later, Filippov’s men linked up with the 14<sup>th</sup> Independent Tank Brigade and completed the encirclement of twenty-two German divisions, including the entire 6<sup>th</sup> Army, in Stalingrad only four days after the start of Operation Uran.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> 1942, sixteen days after the first Soviet tanks broke through the German flanks brushing aside the Rumanian and Italian relief forces, *Reichspropagandaminister* Joseph Goebbels addressed the nation at the *Sportpalast* in Berlin. In an attempt to reassure the German public of the inevitable victory on the eastern front he declared that “we are absolutely convinced that in Russia

the better man, the better race, the better political philosophy, and the better leadership will win the ultimate victory, as they always have throughout the history of the world.”<sup>21</sup> Goebbels’ *Sportpalast* address summons the full plethora of the Nazi propaganda machine, claiming that German victory is inevitable on the grounds of racial, military, and political superiority. This historically determined supremacy, Goebbels argues, manifests itself both on the individual level of “the man” as well as in the realm of the collective, “the better race.”

Goebbels’ speech is, undoubtedly, a premier example of the unrivaled significance of the battle of Stalingrad for the entire German war effort. From the first German offensive in the Stalingrad sector in late July 1942 to well beyond the surrender of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army on February 1<sup>st</sup> 1943, the Nazi propaganda machine eagerly exploited the battle at the Volga as their foremost ideological parable. In effect, Hitler’s master manipulators tied the entire war in the east, if not the fate of the Millennial Reich as a whole, to the fight for Stalingrad. However, Goebbels was not alone in recognizing the symbolic potential of what was unfolding in the late fall of 1942 along the Don. Stalin was equally determined to repel the Nazi propaganda assault on his city as he was resolved to defend Stalingrad at all cost. In response to the German ideological appropriation of Stalingrad, the Russian side therefore equally vigorously inscribed the defense of Stalingrad into the narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Stalingrad was quickly identified as a possible turning point of the war for the Red Army and advertised accordingly. As a result of this ideological over-commitment on both the German and the Russian side, no other event in the course of World War II attracted a comparable ideological investment. The war ended and the totalitarian propaganda machines fell eventually silent, but the spell of the “fateful city” endured into our time. In the almost seven decades since the 6<sup>th</sup> Army surrendered, Stalingrad has produced a complex set of mythological narratives that continue to sometimes enlighten and often romanticize what happened in the winter of 1942/43.

The mythological fascination with the battle of Stalingrad has triggered a rich canvas of responses that is by no means limited to the cultures and individuals involved in the actual event. Over the course of the last 65 years or so, primary sources of individual combatants such as letters, diaries, and memoirs, have been supplemented by extensive and original scholarship. This sustained academic interest in the battle is mirrored by a seemingly unbroken fascination with Stalingrad in popular culture. Besides the many film adaptations of the battle, the event has also produced its own literary culture. Among the most popular literary representations are Heinz Schröter’s *Stalingrad*, William Craig’s *Enemy at*

*the Gates*, Heinz G. Konsalik's *Das Herz der Sechsten Armee*, Heinrich Gerlach's *Die Verratene Armee*, Theodor Plivier's *Stalingrad*, and Vasily Grossmann's *Life and Fate*. More recently American author William T. Vollmann returned to the crossroad of WW II in his award winning novel *Europe Central* (2005).

The novel, in typical Vollmann fashion, explores the ethical foundations of historical agency by juxtaposing the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In alternating chapters the narrative explores the response of artists, secret policemen, politicians, and military commanders to their country's ideological paradigm as well as the growing tensions and ultimate clash between the two antithetical systems. By focusing on the individual response to terror, betrayal, war and sacrifice Vollmann allows the reader an intimate view into the epicenter of the catastrophe that would determine the fate of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the focus on "representative men," individuals inextricably linked to the catastrophic events that occurred in the name of both the Nazi and the Soviet regime, like the commander of the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army Friedrich Paulus and the Russian general and Nazi-collaborator A.A. Vlasov, stresses the minimal difference between the two totalitarianisms and deconstructs the notion of historical determinism as a tool for historical opportunism and historiographic apologies.<sup>2</sup> Vollmann's novel thereby attacks the mythological matrix that has dominated the historiographical memory of Stalingrad. The larger goal of this paper then is to interrogate the prevailing mythology of the battle of Stalingrad in both German and Russian cultural memory, and compare it to the metafictional rendering in *Europe Central*. In addition, I wish to explore Vollmann's representations of General A.A. Vlasov and Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus as examples of representative historical characters that reflect the ideological-mythological matrix that pervades their historio-cultural memory.

For Slavoj Žižek, the historical event of the battle of Stalingrad has become transfigured in three dominant mythological narratives. In his essay "Hallucination as Ideology in Cinema" he distinguishes between the German, the Russian, and the Anglo-American Stalingrad myth. In order to contextualize the metafictional portraits of Paulus and Vlasov in *Europe Central* it seems both appropriate and necessary to briefly interrogate the larger mythological matrix surrounding the entombment of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army in German and Russian memory.

The German side memorizes the battle of Stalingrad predominantly as the pointless sacrifice of thousands of common German soldiers. At the banks of the Volga the men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army, fathers and sons not fanatic Nazis, became

the victims of Hitler's military folly and the dictator's personal obsession with Stalin's city. Accordingly, the memory of Stalingrad emphasizes the betrayal of the regular combatant who was first deployed to fight an unnecessary battle, then instrumentalized by Goebbels's propaganda machine, and finally abandoned by *Volk* and *Führer*. This explanation, undoubtedly, serves as a compelling method to redeem the common German soldier, but does little to excavate the actual reasons for the catastrophic outcome of the campaign.

Spoiled by the tremendous success of the opening months of Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941, the German *OKW* was overconfident in the military superiority of Army Group B, as well as the reach of efficient supply lines.<sup>3</sup> This blatant misinterpretation of the situation at the eastern front, paired with poor intelligence, caused both Hitler and his officers to underestimate the determinism of the Russian resistance at Stalingrad. Finally, Hitler's determination to take Stalingrad was nothing short of a personal obsession that rendered objective military decision making.

Vollmann's novel effectively interrogates this tension between historiographical mythmaking and misguided situational analysis in his two sections on Stalingrad by scrutinizing a whole array of post-war explanations of the German defeat meant to deliver the national trauma, rescue the common soldier, and bolster the larger narrative of the "abandoned army." Thereby, the novel scrutinizes both the process of individual memory as well as the collective commemoration of historical events. Accordingly, *Europe Central* does not only focus on the German (or Russian) myth of Stalingrad, but invites counter-narratives that contrast, even challenge, the official record of the "fateful siege" in order to reveal a kernel of historical truth under the layer of myths that have come to dominate the representation of the events at the Volga. Vollmann's prose, in fact, encircles the event of Stalingrad with a historiographical pincer move that attacks the myth of Stalingrad with fictional barrages and ultimately causes the reader's historical fable to surrender to the novel's competing narratives. First, the novel addresses the myth of the "abandoned army," which presents the 6<sup>th</sup> Army's plight as the product of Berlin's refusal to send in any more desperately needed supplies and reinforcements, including ammunition, food and winter clothing. On *Europe Central's* metafictional battlefield "corpses were often found clad in clumsy overshoes, for the Fascist high command had not issued them any winter supplies."<sup>4</sup>

Although the entire Army Group B was most definitely desperately overextended, to explain the defeat of the 6<sup>th</sup> army purely as a result of insufficient support from Berlin (which was partially caused by misleading reports about the Russian

resistance sent to the *OKW* by Paulus himself) appears unsatisfactory, if not contradictory, considering Hitler's obsession with Stalingrad. The Führer was fixated on the city at the Volga not only because of its strategic importance and its emblematic status. In addition, Stalingrad evoked, even at the time of the battle, an eerie resemblance with another symbolic battle site in German military history: Verdun. In 1916, many German military officials including Hitler believed, Falkenhayn's "mincing machine had been turned off when another month would have destroyed the whole French Army."<sup>5</sup> To avoid another premature retreat from a symbolically important battle, Hitler rejected the cautious alternative to cut losses and retreat to a stable defense line for the winter and ordered Paulus to destroy the remaining Russian resistance by any means necessary. Because

at Stalingrad it was not only the Russian will, but the whole world's assessment of Germany's power which was at stake. To withdraw from the field of battle would be an admission or defeat which though it might be acceptable to a detached and calculating military professional, was unthinkable "in the cosmic orientation of world power forces," as Schwerin von Krosigk might have put it.<sup>6</sup>

The battle of Stalingrad was therefore, even while it was still raging with unrelenting ferocity, already becoming a part of the mythological matrix of alleged German military superiority and a vital component of the ideological foundation of Hitler's reign. The fight at the Volga had, in fact, become so profoundly stylized by Goebbels' propaganda machine that when the German defeat in Stalingrad was first broadcasted on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1943 the radio announcer referred to it as the "greatest epic in German history."<sup>7</sup> But when the catastrophic news spread, the vast ideological investment the Nazi regime had committed to the fate of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army backfired. As a result of this ideological over-commitment, as Ian Kershaw notes, losing this titanic battle shook the very foundations of the mythological matrix of the Third Reich and caused a leadership crisis, for "Hitler was directly implicated in the catastrophe."<sup>8</sup> For the first time the usual party rhetoric could not mask the gravity of the defeat. Among the population a growing awareness spread that not only the war in the east was in jeopardy, but that a military turning point had been reached that could bring the Millennial Reich to its knees.

Another commonly employed strategy of historical mythmaking on the German side focuses on the level of military leadership and involves the legacy of Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus. Paulus himself, after the war, promoted

the “I have known from the very beginning but Hitler would not listen” excuse for Stalingrad, casting himself as the dutiful and morally conscious commander who attempted to prevent the catastrophe, but found himself overpowered by the forces of history. In a short essay entitled “The basic facts of the Sixth’s Army’s operations at Stalingrad,” written in June of 1945, Paulus repeatedly describes his efforts to convince both the *OKH* and Hitler of the necessity to withdraw the 6<sup>th</sup> Army. In this retrospective effort to legitimize his actions in the final weeks of the battle, Paulus further asserts that “the Supreme Command, by adhering to its insistence on the capture of Stalingrad as the main object [...] was now more than ever indulging in pipe-dreams and wishful thinking that were nothing less than a betrayal of the troops in the field.”<sup>9</sup> Although Paulus’ post-war claims are backed by passages from his war correspondence, the documents, by no means, present ample evidence to unconditionally accept his account of the events. For the very same documents also portray Paulus as an obedient servant of the very military despot he blamed for ignoring his pleas and sealing the fate of his army. Why then, one may ask, did Paulus’ sense of obedience trump his concern for the survival of his men? The commonly cited explanation was inaugurated by Paulus himself, when he wrote in a brief document entitled “Stalingrad, a brief survey in retrospect” (1945): “I was a soldier, and I believed that it was by obeying orders that I could best serve my people.”<sup>10</sup> In this sentence Paulus’ memory of the decision making process at Stalingrad takes on another important turn. In his own estimation he acted not out of obedience to Hitler, but out of service for the German people. In his assessment, surrendering

would have been an unequivocal, revolutionary, political act against Hitler [and] by abandoning Stalingrad contrary to orders, I should have been playing into Hitler’s hands and given him the opportunity of castigating the cowardice and disobedience of his Generals and putting upon them the whole blame for the military defeat that was looming larger and larger.<sup>11</sup>

Written in Russian captivity, the above statement refashions the surrender of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army as a sacrificial act that helped to protect the military leadership (which Paulus seemed to have perceived as somehow separated from the political apparatus of the Third Reich) from the wrath of Hitler. It further allows Paulus to turn his failure to disobey Hitler’s directive and attempt a break out on his own accord into

a myth of preservation that ultimately accelerated the German defeat and enabled him to “negotiate” the ensuing defeat with the Soviet Union.

This myth, promulgated by historians such as Walter Goerlitz, who sees Paulus as a “responsible Commander-in-Chief,” first and foremost serves to redeem the only German Field Marshal ever taken alive and clear his name from the accusation that “the downfall of our Reich can [...] be blamed on Colonel-General Paulus.”<sup>12</sup> But *Europe Central’s* fictional inquiry into the complex mythological matrix surrounding the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army forcefully denies the Paulus legend to gain precedence over his questionable actions. Instead, Vollmann’s portrayal of Paulus shows the complexity of assessing this historical character by locating two competing myths within the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army.

The novel juxtaposes the Field Marshal’s attempt to justify his orders in the closing stages of the battle with blatant acts of opportunism that unseat Paulus’ military and historical legacy. Especially the chapter “the Last Field-Marshal,” accuses Paulus of cowardice for his refusal to try to break out of the Russian *Kessel*. Paulus’ decision to forego a concentrated assault on the Russian lines during Operation Winter Tempest in an attempt to try to link up with General Hoth’s 23<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Divisions becomes an indicative example of the egomaniacal and ruthless nature of the Field Marshal’s decision making. Vollmann thus juxtaposes the historiographic image of the “responsible Commander-in-Chief” with the opportunistic defector who demoted himself to a private individual in the face of inescapable defeat, thereby exposing the fragile nature of historical memory and military legacy.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to historiographic explanations that focus on military leadership and tactics, *Europe Central* reflects the geographically driven “myth of the Russian motherland” that will, inevitably, like the Russian winter, wear down any invader. In accordance with this seemingly self-fulfilling prophecy, the German army’s advance into the Russian tundra was halted when “the fascist machine [ran] out of fuel before Moscow.”<sup>14</sup> Vollmann’s assessment of the German failure at Stalingrad clearly establishes an historical reference point in Napoleon’s Russian campaign of 1812. Similar to the 6<sup>th</sup> Army in Stalingrad and to an extent even the entire German force in Russia, the Grand Army was overconfident in its technological and tactical superiority and miscalculated the severity of the combat conditions. Napoleon had assembled an unprecedented force of over 600,000 men and over 1200 guns of which an estimated 310,000 crossed the Niemen in late May of 1812.<sup>15</sup> Less than 7 months later only about 60,000 men were alive to receive the news that their emperor had just announced, on December 19<sup>th</sup>, the conclusion of the

ruinous Russian campaign.<sup>16</sup> From the estimated 250,000- 300,000 German soldiers trapped in the caldron of Stalingrad in November 1942 only about 5,000 returned to Germany in the mid-fifties.<sup>17</sup> By evoking the Napoleonic debacle of 1812, Vollmann's novel stresses the validity of historical precedence, a strategy the Russian side employed with similar efficiency in their commemoration of the battle. In Russian collective memory the battle of Stalingrad has been immortalized as part of the Great Patriotic War, a play on the term Patriotic War used to describe the defeat of the Grand Army 140 years prior.

Subsequently, the Stalinist regime introduced a similarly complex set of mythological narratives to explain the costliest land battle ever fought in military history. On the Russian side, Stalingrad is remembered as the sacred battle for the defense of the motherland in which the common worker/soldier overcame the seemingly invincible fascist war machine. The "workers with hammers" who repelled the fascist invasion at Stalingrad, however, didn't do so by themselves, but were part of a collective effort that involved the entire population:

The people of the Stalingrad Region, as well as of the neighboring regions, afforded the troops extensive aid, supplying the Army with food, equipment and manpower, servicing tanks, planes, and other weapons. Despite the fighting in the vicinity, the collective farmers brought home almost the entire harvest. The region provided the country with 368,000 tons of grain, more than 15,000 tons of vegetables and 53,400 tones of meat.<sup>18</sup>

Official party historians thus enshrined the victory at the Volga as a "war of the people" that permeated every strata of Russian society and signaled the superiority of the social and political system of the Soviet Union. Infused with the myth of Soviet military science, the unwavering faith in the economic and scientific war potential of the USSR, the Stalingrad victory not only mirrors the inevitable superiority of the Stalinist state, but also marks the emergence of the myth of the Red Army.

Before the battle of Stalingrad not even the Stalinist propaganda machine could transform the underequipped, and often insufficiently trained, Russian units into a menacing war machine that would let the German soldiers shake in their boots. Swift victories in the first year of the Russian campaign and large numbers of deserters had instilled the invading German armies with a sense of invincibility. Blinded by Goebbels' propaganda apparatus that was ever quick to



emphasize the inherent inferiority of the Russian *Untermensch*, regular soldiers and commanding officers alike believed that total victory in the east was only a matter of time, a very short amount of time. Above all others Hitler, by now immersed in a perverted *Endsiegfantasie*, that could hardly be more detached from the *Rattenkrieg* his soldiers were fighting, promoted the ensuing triumph in Russia. Already one month after the German invasion, in a telephone conversation with his Chief of Staff Colonel General Franz Halder, the *Führer* announced confidently: “The Russian is finished.”<sup>19</sup> While the progress of the *Wehrmacht* was halted by the Red Army in the following winter and leading army officers became increasingly doubtful of an easy victory in the east, Hitler remained unrelentingly optimistic. Even when Paulus himself informed the “Supreme Commander” of the escalating resistance at Stalingrad, Hitler responded that “the army need only hit the Russian a few heavy blows [...] then you will see that the Russian colossus is standing on feet of clay.”<sup>20</sup>

But Hitler was wrong. It was at the banks of the Volga, that not only the military momentum at the eastern front turned against the Germans, but that the Red Army, through an unexampled display of tenacity by its soldiers and unseen tactical cunning by its commanding officers, reversed its image. The Stalingrad victory almost single-handedly founded the myth of the invincibility of the Red Army, a myth that in the remaining years of the war instilled a sense of terror in the German soldiers while carrying the Soviet forces to absolute victory.<sup>21</sup>

In Russian collective memory, the narrative of the sacred battle of Stalingrad carries an immensely imposing set of ideological signifiers. Precisely because Stalin invested so heavily into the ideological significance of the battle, did the Russian victory trigger a turning point in morale that left the Russians equally euphoric as it left the Germans traumatized. One particular sub-myth, as Slavoj Žižek remarks, proved especially important in the formation of Russian Stalingrad mythology: the legend of the Russian sniper. Snipers played a crucial role in the Russian tactics employed in the urban battlefield at Stalingrad. The unique terrain of industrial ruins and underground tunnels provided excellent cover and close enemy proximity thereby creating ideal conditions for sniper activity. More importantly, snipers aided the Russian side to equalize the German superiority in heavy armor at the beginning of the fighting.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the Army Military Council encouraged the formation of sniper divisions. Successful snipers, such as Viktor Medvedev or Vasili Zaitsev, soon became national heroes, and their accomplishments were published daily in *In Our Country's Defense*, the Red Army's newspaper. The recognition and subsequent glorification of individual soldiers in

the emerging sniper myth reflects the changing military strategy of the Red Army at the Stalingrad front: As the tactical strategy adapts to the specific realities of the battle, so does the Russian propaganda machine. The Soviet cant, in a remarkable reorientation of their political propaganda, even begins to embrace the virtues of heroic individualism to the point that the birth of the sniper myth represents, as Žižek rightfully notes, "the Stalinist turn from egalitarianism to competition and the praise of individual achievements."<sup>23</sup>

Vollmann's novel addresses the mythological importance of the sniper for Stalinist propaganda by depicting the aesthetics of death from nowhere, a death that was seemingly not the result of steel and iron, of bayonets and flamethrowers, but an event unfolding in spiritual silence: "A soldier screamed, and blood came beautifully from his heart. The rubble clinked faintly. It was useless trying to find the sniper."<sup>24</sup> By turning towards a distinctively individualized form of hero-worship and martyrdom, *Europe Central* suggests, Stalinist propaganda posits the sacrificed individual as the particularized manifestation of the communal, communist, system. Individual and society become interchangeable in that the subject mirrors, while simultaneously being absorbed by, the will of the collective.

At first sight the seeming synthesis of individual and collective "spirit" in the battle of Stalingrad seems to contradict the Marxian doctrine of equal collectivity, in that it elevates the individual in question from the plain of collective equality to a plain of hierarchical superiority. This superficially anti-Marxian glorification of the individual does, however, not degenerate into an unrestricted, unquestioned *Führerkult* as in the example of fascist propaganda. Instead, and at this point the novel seems to identify a difference between the two totalitarian regimes as well as their mythological appropriation of the event, the Stalinist hero emerges as the synthesis of an antithetical relationship between the self-conscious subject and his class within the concrete historical situation of the battle of Stalingrad. It is only in this purely dialectical scenario which posits fascism against communism, Hitler against Stalin, the past against the future, technology against manpower, that the myth of the Russian sniper can emerge as the ideological savior of Stalingrad and justify the deaths of hundreds of thousands of common soldiers.

The colossal numbers of casualties on both sides provoke the question what did persuade both Russian and German soldiers and military commanders<sup>25</sup> to bring the ultimate sacrifice; or, as in the case of Paulus to surrender and collaborate with the enemy. For Vollmann, the individual response to extraordinary historical situations is the key to understanding both the representation of history and its principle performers. On the German side the notion of sacrifice for the fatherland

is tangled up in a nationalistic mythology of pan-Germanic hero worship in which the fallen soldier becomes inaugurated to the elite circle of eternal heroes of *Großdeutschland* where he joins the pantheon of Siegfried, Barbarossa, Hindenburg and Bismarck.<sup>26</sup> Within this narrative the German soldier dies for his country and the creation of the Millennial Reich. In contrast to this purely nationalistic model of human sacrifice, dying for the Revolution means to die purely for an idea and not for a nation.<sup>27</sup> The Russian soldier's death, Benedict Anderson explains,

draws its grandeur from the degree to which it is felt to be something fundamentally pure. Ironically enough, it may be that to the extent that Marxist interpretations of history are felt (rather than intellected) as representations of ineluctable necessity, they also acquire an aura of purity and disinterestedness<sup>28</sup>

The two pincers of William Vollmann's fictional attack on the memory and representation of Stalingrad are the core chapters of *Europe Central*; "Breakout" and "The Last Field-Marshal." In pace with the dialectical fashion of the novel they are dedicated to the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Russian Shock Army commander General Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov and Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, commanding officer of the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army at Stalingrad. Initially, Vollmann's pairing of Paulus and Vlasov seems odd. Why, one may rightfully ask, didn't he juxtapose the German commanding officer at Stalingrad with one of his Soviet counterparts; Zhukov, Timoshenko, or Chuikov? Besides the ambiguous military and historical legacy both commanders share in their respective cultures, I would like to propose some suggestions that might help to explain Vollmann's unusual pair. The first reason is related to the metahistorical approach of the novel. Vollmann is not attempting to produce an accurate account of historical events. Instead, the narrative attempts to interrogate those uncharted territories of historical memory that are inaccessible for conventional historiographies. Vollmann's novel, in a sense, interrogates the inner life of historical individuals in a realm of poetic possibility. More specifically, the two chapters on Paulus and Vlasov focus on the personal response to defeat, surrender, and death. Vollmann paired Vlasov with Paulus, because both protagonists experience a similarly radical breakdown of ideological obedience that ultimately leads them to betray the cause they formerly served. Their internal struggle between unrelenting commitment to an ideological cause and the desire for personal heroism thus erases the difference between fascism and

Stalinism, and what remains is a haunting depiction of universal human responses to the terror of totalitarianism.

All too often attempting to portray the horror of war and genocide involves, especially in the case of the Second World War and its too towering dictators Hitler and Stalin, labeling the perpetrators as mad men. But to label war criminals and dictators as merely insane strips them of any responsibility for their unspeakable actions, absolves their obedient followers from their failure to resist and unites *Volk* and *Führer* in a universal *Untergangsmythos*. Once relocated to the realm of the mythic Hitler and Stalin effortlessly become reinvented as tragic figures of history. This historiographic displacement masks the very core of what constitutes their truly seductive power as well as the full extent of the evil at hand; their human element. Acknowledging that these two totalitarian dictators were men of flesh and blood who faced the ethical implications of their actions but nevertheless did what they did, unveils the true magnitude of the delusion of both fascism and Stalinism. Exactly because of its portrayal of the human element within the seemingly mythic narrative of these totalitarian realities, *Europe Central* challenges our mythologized history of WW II and exposes its contradictory character. Accordingly, in the novel, both Paulus and Vlasov, in contrast to Hitler or Stalin, are contradictory characters.<sup>29</sup> Vollmann's narrative identifies these two figures as perfect vantage points for an analysis of totalitarianism because both generals exemplify the paradoxical struggle of a human being attempting to unite their obedience to an inhumane system with fundamentally human desires.<sup>30</sup>

Vlasov's story, the first of the two, is juxtaposed with the siege of Leningrad earlier in the novel and the siege of Stalingrad in the following chapter. Similar to the assault of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army on Stalingrad, "Breakout" is the story of the ongoing German assault on Vlasov's character. In the novel, Vlasov is imprisoned by the German *Wehrmacht* after a week long odyssey in the no-man's-land between the front lines somewhere in the forest and marshes near Demyansk.<sup>31</sup> After his capture, Vlasov expects nothing but interrogation, torture and finally execution from his captors. To his surprise, however, he is treated well, if not to say privileged. Similar to Paulus' case, the seemingly universal appreciation of high-ranking military commanders saves Vlasov from the fate that the majority of Russian prisoners of war had to face. The rules of engagement seem to be intact, as in the last war where "the Germans behaved very correctly."<sup>32</sup>

From his initial meeting with General Lindemann Vlasov, who prides himself in his absolute devotion to rationalism, is conciliated by the sound logic of his captors who paint all things German as the heart and soul of rationalism itself.

Fascist Germany might be an oppressive system, Vollmann's novel suggests, but an oppressive system that obeys the logic of the modern, rational and individualized world. A world in which, in contrast to the collectivization of every social strata in Stalinism, individual achievement is recognized, even promoted. Vlasov is drawn to the rationality of individualism because it presents him with the possibility of transhistorical military glory as a product of individual genius that transcends national boundaries. If not fascism as such at least the German *Wehrmacht* seems to offer that possibility to him. His captor Lindemann skillfully detects and provokes Vlasov's desire for recognition: "I've heard you admire General Guderian. Well, we Germans also give credit where credit is due. Some of us don't mind calling your Tukhachevsky a genius."<sup>33</sup> Vlasov, driven by feelings of underappreciation and abandonment that are grounded in Stalin's earlier refusal to authorize Vlasov's requests to withdraw his troops, thus becomes an easy target for the lure of fascist rationalism. Ultimately, he embraces the Third Reich and its *Führer*. Whereas, in the eyes of Lindemann, Germany acknowledges and cultivates true genius, Stalinism extinguishes it because individual achievement threatens the absolute of uncompromised equality that the system is supposed to generate.

In contrast to the rational terror of the *Gestapo*, *Europe Central* proposes, the terror of the *NKVD* was arbitrary. In his recent book *The Parallax View* Slavoj Žižek asserts that "Stalinist irrationality pervaded the entire social body."<sup>34</sup> Whereas *Gestapo* police was "still looking for proofs and traces of actual activity against the regime," the terror of the *NKVD* was a complete and total fabrication.<sup>35</sup> What Žižek describes as the rationality behind fascist terror is then exactly what prompts Vlasov to give in to the illusion of fascist order. It not only offers him the chance of individual achievement and a personal vision, the establishment of the Russian National People's Army and military redemption on the battlefield, but his captivity in the "Reich of Rationalism" is also more comprehensible than his life under "Comrade Stalin." After a period of assiduous indoctrination Vlasov accepts that "in the Reich people do not simply disappear without cause, in Stalinist Russia, now, that's a different matter."<sup>36</sup>

Vlasov's conversion to fascist rationality should be viewed above all as the misguided attempt to legitimize his failure to fully adhere to his own totalitarian paradigm. Similar to Paulus, he is unable to commit suicide and thereby assert his unwavering loyalty. Instead, Vlasov's obedience is overwhelmed by a wave of ethical contradictions and selfish desires. Driven by the wish to separate his patriotic loyalty to his country from absolute submission to Stalinism, Vlasov attempts to undo his betrayal to his motherland under a leader who acknowledges

his individual value. To accelerate his Germanic conversion, Vlasov even marries his very own Aryan Valkyrie. This unlikely union with his blonde wife Heidi, who carries not only the most German of all names but also “a stunning chest,” completes his acculturation into the *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>37</sup> The marriage between the “Aryan” Heidi and the “Bolshevik” Vlasov is not merely a means for Vollmann to show the interchangeability of the heroic ideal in totalitarian ideologies, but also reveals the fascist character of any militaristic fascination. In fact, Heidi is quick to detect the proto-fascist traits in Vlasov’s character: “I think you’re a real Nazi and you don’t even know it.”<sup>38</sup> As the chapter progresses, however, Vlasov’s attempts to gain high-level support for Operation Skorpion become increasingly futile and he sees his dreams of returning to Russia as the liberator of an abused and violated nation destroyed. Progressively disillusioned by Himmler’s unkept promise of making him the commander of a fighting division, Vlasov seeks refuge in a world of deception and drinking that only accelerates his fascist conversion but does little to reanimate his career.

Vlasov’s complete acceptance of the “rationality” of fascism depends heavily on the question of war crimes. Before the former Russian general is captured by a German reconnaissance unit, Vlasov, according to Vollmann’s metafictional episode, spent twenty days in the no-man’s-land between Soviet and Nazi lines. During this time that proved “crucial to his development,” he discovers a mass grave in a remote Russian village.<sup>39</sup> At the site of the massacre, Vlasov finds a 7.65 millimeter Geco shell that convinces him the atrocity must have been committed by advancing German forces. Vlasov picks up the artifact and pledges to avenge the executions. But the shell, supposedly an ever present reminder of the bodies of the “fifty peasant women” he found murdered in the mass grave, quickly loses its signifying function and, instead, comes to represent Vlasov’s unwillingness to accept moral responsibility for his own cowardice and cooperation with those responsible for the atrocity.<sup>40</sup> After his imprisonment, Vlasov betrays his vow to both remember and revenge the war crimes committed by the Germans and begins to embrace the fascist rationale of racially motivated total war. Thereby, he is not only able to effectively rid his conscience of the possibility that he subscribed to a perverted rationality but also engages in an extraordinary act of historical falsification that vividly epitomizes Vollmann’s plea for historical responsibility and beautifully extrapolates the dangers of historical mythmaking. The moment when Vlasov’s historical conscience is completely erased occurs when his captors argue that the massacre could have been committed by the Red Army and that the bullet he is carrying was possibly fired from a Russian soldier’s rifle. This scene not

only mirrors that “deep penetration was successful at last” — the completion of Vlasov’s fascist conversion — but further elucidates that historical narratives are seemingly interchangeable.<sup>41</sup> For Vollmann, even the historical artifact, the 7.65 millimeter Geco shell, no longer suffices as a reliable source of historical truth but adds to the increasingly indeterminable nature of historical culpability.<sup>42</sup>

The “fall” of Vlasov’s conscience thus mirrors the ultimate victory of the German propaganda machine and the complete and total submission of the historical subject. By accepting Strik-Strikfeldt’s hypothesis that, based on the factual evidence the massacre could as well have been committed by Russian soldiers, Vlasov forfeits his historical agency and fully retreats into the illusion that he has earned a place within the fascist order that will allow him to command, once again, his own army and to liberate Russia on his terms. Obviously, Vollmann’s Vlasov is a character marked by hubris and delusion whose actions are driven by the opportunistic desire to secure a place in the annals of history. Accordingly, his cooperation with the National Socialists is the attempt to outwit the totalitarian apparatus. But what Vlasov doesn’t realize is the fact that Himmler and his SS myrmidons merely allow him the illusion to be a vital component of their terrible game. After all, who compels them to keep their promises? Vlasov thus never got the chance to lead an army into battle, neither in fiction nor in real life. Instead, he and his band of Slovakian partisans surrendered to Patton at war’s end. Patton turned him over to the Russians and so one of the ablest commanders of the Red Army was hanged by the very man he dreamt of chasing out of Moscow. In the end, his act of denial cost Vlasov not only his moral consciousness and his life, but also his chance for historiographic redemption.

In stark contrast to Vollmann’s fictionalized Vlasov stands *Europe Central*’s characterization of German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus. In an intriguing synthesis of his competing historical legacies discussed earlier, the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army at Stalingrad is portrayed as a distant strategist who hovers over his maps to the sounds of Beethoven’s symphonies. A true voyeur of warfare he follows the tank of his son Ernst from his command stand without the slightest emotional involvement; the pair of binoculars resting in his perfectly steady hands that are protected from the painful winter breeze by a pair of clean white gloves. Vollmann writes:

I see him as the central figure of a parable, and therefore apathetic in spite of himself; in his long leather trench coat, his gloves and collar perfectly white even now, his loyalty gleaming, he was brought into the story of our

Reich to illustrate a principle, to carry out a function, to think and suffer while things were done to him [...] He was nothing but a playing-card soldier, a character in a book. He sat very still in his tent and listened to Beethoven on the gramophone.<sup>43</sup>

The description offered to the reader by the anonymous narrator establishes Paulus as a metafictional template that both deconstructs and distorts the historical person. Vollmann's Paulus is an idealized Prussian army officer, a product of the tactics of Clausewitz and the conduct of the *Bildungsbürgertum*. His description evokes the proud history of the German military leadership. A group that understood themselves as a "state within the state," an organization of military professionals founded on discipline, military expertise and loyalty to the constitution; a group that had betrayed their past virtues and values and become subservient to Hitler. What Vollmann then skillfully untangles in the portrayal of Paulus is the history of conflict between the German *Wehrmacht*, especially its leading officers, and Hitler's *Führerpolitik*. In effect, the *Wehrmacht* had been progressively emasculated by the Hitler Regime ever since the National Socialist Party took power in 1933, and by the onset of Operation Barbarossa in June of 1941, Hitler had effectively assumed the role of commander in chief. By the time Hitler ordered the 6<sup>th</sup> Army to take Stalingrad by every means necessary, any opposition against Hitler's military decision making was both few and futile. And although Hitler's military orders simply led to the entombment of the entire army the *OKH* (with few exceptions) did little to change its fate.

The story of Paulus in *Europe Central* is, indeed, a parable — the experience of many condensed into a representative story that teaches a lesson. Paulus is the epitome of an entire army, maybe even an entire nation, which has lost its consciousness on the long way to the Volga. What is left by the winter of 1942/43 is merely the façade of an old order of war and obedience that has long lost touch with its modern surroundings. Paulus' conduct is unfit to deal with the realities of fully mechanized combat as much as it has proven unfit to curtail the terror of fascist politics. The lesson Vollmann's parable of Paulus teaches is the fact that totalitarian dictators neither care for traditions nor respect them, and that the German military elite has to be held historiographically accountable for their failure to act on behalf of their innocent victims and their own soldiers. Vollmann's novel thus effectively illuminates that the entire myth of the German *Wehrmacht* and its code of honorable sacrifice had transformed into a "mere mechanism of obedience and



discipline without the freedom of the soldierly ethic, a total inhumanity, dressed up in words that had become hollow.<sup>34</sup>

*Europe Central* describes Paulus as an operationally skilled theorist, a gifted tactician and excellent teacher in the military academy. By doing so, Vollmann comments on the work of a historian and the problems his occupation presents. As much as Paulus follows his son with his binoculars from afar, the historian tries to decipher the past from a temporal distance. These distant observations might, however, not always be entirely accurate, or even lead to disastrous misinterpretations of a situation. In Paulus' case his tactical cunning could not outweigh the fact that he had never independently commanded a regiment, a division or a corps before he was assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Army. In fact, his last active command had been that of an armored reconnaissance detachment in 1934.<sup>45</sup> To understand the intricate complexities of the past therefore means to give up the safe distance of generalizing narratives and to highlight the often forgotten struggles of the individuals involved.

However striking the differences in appearance and behavior, both Paulus and Vlasov share the same longing for military appreciation. The appreciation in question, granted to others in life comes to them only in exchange for the ultimate sacrifice. It is here, at this juncture of sacrifice and selfishness, where they both falter and abandon the logic of their ideological paradigm. Instead of eternal heroism they choose the shame of surrender, captivity and collaboration with the enemy. In the face of death the power of totalitarian reason comes to an end for both Paulus and Vlasov. Death for their respective country and the ensuing inception into the pantheon of Stalinist/fascist heroes can not overpower their desire to live. This refusal to obey the system they so dutifully served before does, however, not set them free; in an ironic twist, they have to serve the very countries they were fighting against.

In a 1993 interview William T. Vollmann commented on the question of personal responsibility within a larger historical scenario by saying:

If Eichmann hadn't happened to have lived in Germany at a certain time, he would have died unknown. He was such a puppet of his setting that what he wound up doing wasn't completely his fault. He wanted somebody to love and then when Hitler came along to fill that need, Eichmann had to do what his puppet master made him do.<sup>46</sup>

Vollmann's statement mirrors the commonly cited phenomenon of the *Führerkult* as the explanation for the absence of individually determined agency within the larger system of fascism. Additionally, it refers to the desire for love and recognition on the side of Bormann from the dictator that renders the historical individual incapable of breaking the spell. The *Führer* in this interpretation is rendered as the ultimate love object whose recognition salvages the historical subject from historical anonymity. It is therefore in this act, the reciprocal recognition of the totalitarian subject and the totalitarian dictator, that the historical subject dialectically overcomes individual isolation and fuses with the social body of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>47</sup> This abandonment of individuality not only forfeits all moral and ethical responsibility on the side of the individual but is furthermore idealized in terms of total completion. Major-General Schmidt, Paulus' chief of staff, readily exclaims that the "greatest happiness any of our contemporaries can experience [is] that of serving a genius."<sup>48</sup> Similarly General Lindemann believes that "personal opinions are not important [because] fate has sent Germany a great genius [and] we must obey his will."<sup>49</sup>

Paulus, at least until his promotion to Field Marshal, equally stays under the spell of the *Führer* and obeys Hitler's directive against all military logic. Even when General Hoth launches Operation Winter Tempest on December 12<sup>th</sup> 1942 and moves toward the encircled army, Paulus refuses to attempt a break out. His reasons: fuel shortage and Hitler's orders. In the end it will take another bloody Russian offensive (Operation Koltso on January 10<sup>th</sup>) and Hitler's indirect suicide demand that will force Paulus into capitulation. At that very moment Vollmann tears apart his unwavering pillar of obedience and begins to demystify the *Führer's* spell. After months of absurd compliance Paulus not only disobeys a direct military order by surrendering the entire army, but he also disregards an even graver unwritten directive. His refusal to commit suicide after Hitler promoted him to Field Marshal constitutes nothing short of an outrageous affront against the dictator in that it negates Hitler's acknowledgment of Paulus' services as well as an untainted military legacy post mortem in the Millennial Reich. Further, the fact that Paulus, in response to the Soviet request for an unconditional German surrender, declared himself a private person in order to avoid accountability for the capitulation impedes any attempts to cast the Field Marshal as a responsible commander and honorable soldier.<sup>50</sup>

In the aftermath of his surrender Paulus undergoes an equally radical reeducation as Vlasov. He as well becomes intrigued by the possibilities of reclaiming his fatherland on his own terms and chooses to comply with his captors. The obvious

parallel structure of the chapters is further strengthened by a set of recurring themes that tie the fate of General Vlasov to the fate of “the last Field-Marshal.” The leaflets signed by Vlasov advertising a Russian insurrection against Stalin are dropped over the Stalingrad front and Vlasov himself becomes reinscribed in the Paulus section in the conversation between Paulus and his Russian captors.

Vollmann’s analogy of the two generals exposes the insufficiency of totalitarian paradigms for personal fulfillment. Although both characters are, without a doubt, guilty of moral opportunism and personal hedonism, Vollmann seems to suggest that there is something fundamentally universal to be learned from their stories. This moral historical lesson is that the fateful lure of the war machine with its promise of individual heroism can neither be tamed by a collective ideology nor controlled by the forces of tradition and “culture.” In fact, the seeming bulwarks against it all too easily become catalysts of the forces of history. What we forget, *Europe Central* seems to imply, is the fact that behind the screens of mythologized national narratives lurk individual choices and personal decisions that have shaped the course of history.

Additionally, the novel approaches the minimal differences between the larger systems of Soviet Stalinism and German fascism that seem to be irrelevant on first glance but that have, as the fate of the both Vlasov and Paulus shows, a very similar effect on the individual. Paulus, in the end of the novel, is saved from his fascist illusion and finds a new life and purpose within the system of communism. Vlasov on the other hand, once he betrays the Soviet cause, finds himself progressively deteriorating into a state of complete and total illusion. Whereas the communal system of Stalinism can purge the remnants of a misguided *Führerkult*, fascism is not capable of substituting for the loss of the communal aspect of Soviet communism. In the end, it is Paulus who awakes from his ideological blinding and “wonders how he ever could have believed that anybody could defeat the Soviet Union which stood for the people. He now saw that national questions, if indeed they were not entirely spurious, should always be subordinated to more general social questions.”<sup>51</sup>

By the end of World War II Vlasov is dead, hanged by the Russian victors. Paulus converted to communism and became an advisor for the Red Army, headed the Russian backed National Committee for Free Germany, and later served as a police officer in the GDR, but he would never be allowed to visit West Germany again. For James Crossley *Europe Central* is the continuation of Vollmann’s project “to examine all the varieties of human experience in an attempt to judge what morality truly is.”<sup>52</sup> In the example of Vlasov and Paulus it seems that moral responsibility

and soldierly ethics are romantic notions obliterated between the unmerciful pincers of totalitarianism.

## Notes

1. Quoted in: Jay W. Baird, "The Myth of Stalingrad," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4.3 (1969): 193-194.

2. 19<sup>th</sup> century New England historian Francis Parkman authored, among other works, a seven volume series on the British-French conflict in America. In *France and England in North America*, Parkman presents detailed portraits of "representative men," historical characters at the heart of military and political decision making and infused with the spirit of the age. His Pontiac, Montcalm, Wolfe, or Frontenac all served as ideal historical subjects. They were both models of civil virtue and bravery, mythical forefathers of the American spirit and defendants of the progressive law of history, and ideal literary characters. *Montcalm and Wolfe, or The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, thus not only reflects the belief of its author that "the history of [...] the American continent was, at least partially, due to the exploits of identifiable individuals in a social structure peculiarly stratified and peculiarly dependent on its leaders" (Otis Pease, *Parkman's History: The Historian as Literary Artist* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), 42), but also exemplify that both history and literature depend on great characters. Vollmann's *Europe Central*, I would like to suggest, similarly positions fictionalized historical subjects, such as Paulus, Vlasov, Shostakovich, and Kollwitz at the heart of the Russian-German conflict, thereby establishing a historiographic methodology that rests on the interrogation of individual action in the context of socio-political paradigms.

3. *OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht)*. The *OKW* was created by Hitler in 1938 in an effort to strengthen his personal influence on the command structure of the German Army, Navy, and Air Force and to subordinate them to direct control from Berlin. In contrast to the *OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres)*, controlling only the army's operations, the *OKW*, coordinated, in theory, all branches of the armed forces.

4. William T. Vollmann, *Europe Central* (New York: Viking, 2005), 262.

5. Allen Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict: 1941-1945* (New York: Quill, 1965), 240.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Quoted in W.A. Boelcke, ed., "*Wollt Ihr den totalen Krieg?*" *Die Geheimen Goebbels-Konferenzen 1939-1943* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1969), 437.

8. Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 193.

9. Quoted in Walter Goerlitz, *Paulus and Stalingrad: A Life of Field-Marshal Friedrich Paulus with Notes, Correspondence and Documents from his Papers* (New York: Citadel, 1963), 230.

10. *Ibid.*, 286. Ironically, the Stalingrad memoir Paulus completed a year before his death in 1956 bears the title *I stand here under orders*.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Ibid, 291; Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 394.
13. Goerlitz, *Paulus and Stalingrad*, 291.
14. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 264.
15. R. G. Burton, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia* (London: George Allen and Company, 1914), 19-20.
16. Ibid, 218.
17. Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 439-440.
18. P.N. Pospelov, ed., *Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union 1941-1945: A General Outline* (Moscow: Progress, 1974), 162.
19. Clark, *Barbarossa*, 209.
20. Quoted in Joachim Wieder and Heinrich Graf von Einsiedel, eds., *Stalingrad: Memories and Reassessments* (London: Arms and Armour, 1995), 198.
21. In fact, the Red Army would remain "undefeated" until February 15 1989, when the last Russian troops left Afghanistan after more than 9 years of fighting.
22. This *toter Schwerpunkt*, the concentration of heavy armor at the tip of the attacking front, would later turn into a costly disadvantage for the German armies, as it invited counterattacks from the flanks.
23. Slavoj Žižek, "Hallucination as Ideology in Cinema," *Theory and Event* 6.1 (2002): par. 3. [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v006/6.1zizek.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v006/6.1zizek.html)
24. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 357.
25. On January 30, three days before the capitulation, General Paulus wired Hitler his congratulations to his tenth anniversary in the *Reichskanzlei*:

On the anniversary of your accession to power, the Sixth Army greets its *Führer*. The Swastika still waves over Stalingrad. May our struggle be an example to present and future generations and encourage them never to capitulate in a hopeless situation. Then Germany will be victorious. *Heil, mein Führer* (Quoted in Heinz Schröter, *Stalingrad* (New York: Dutton, 1958), 174-5).

26. Goebbels compared the battle of Stalingrad in a speech on January 30 to the battle of the *Nibelungen*, who "too stood in the raging flames, and quenched their thirst with their own blood", while Göring aligned the soldiers of the Sixth Army with the Spartans at Thermopylae (Quoted in Baird, "The Myth of Stalingrad," 197). The latter comparison was also exploited by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein in his war memoirs *Lost Victories* (1955). Von Manstein begins his seventy-seven page long chapter on Stalingrad by saying:

“Never will these lines, telling of the heroism of the defenders of Thermopylae and ever after regarded as the song of the praise of bravery, fidelity, and soldierly obedience, be carved in stone at Stalingrad in memory of Sixth Army’s martyrdom on the Volga. Nor is any cross or cenotaph likely to be raised over the vanished traces of the German soldiers who starved, froze and died there. Yet the memory of the indescribable suffering, their unparalleled heroism, fidelity, and devotion to duty will live on long after the victors’ cries of triumph have died away and the bereaved, the disillusioned and the bitter at heart have fallen silent (Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (1955) (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994), 289).

27. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, directs attention to the fact that “the Soviet Union shares with the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland the rare distinction of refusing nationality in its naming” (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 2).

28. Ibid., 144. The sense of purity that Benedict Anderson describes is precisely what causes Žižek to proclaim the acceptability of contemporary *Ostalgie* the romanticized idealization of life in one of the former socialist nations of Eastern Europe such as the GDR, Poland, The Czech Republic etc. (Slavoj Žižek, “The Two Totalitarianisms,” *London Review of Books* 27.6 (17 March 2005): 8). Stalinism, Žižek’s argument goes, is perceived as a corrupted, yet necessary manifestation of an originally emancipatory, even desirable process; for the simple reason that it mirrors the historical, political struggle between the classes. Fascism lacks this emancipatory potential. Instead of addressing the fundamental conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, fascism dislocates the political contest onto a racial plain:

The political struggle is naturalized as racial conflict, the class antagonism inherent in the social structure reduced to the invasion of a foreign (Jewish) body which disturbs the harmony of the Aryan community (Žižek, “The Two Totalitarianisms,” 8).

The emancipatory potential that redeems Stalinism in comparison to fascism, in Žižek’s estimation, can thus be defined as the active acknowledgement of the political-economic struggle among the classes as the only liberating historical force. Once this distinction between fascism and Stalinism has been made it is possible to reinterpret Operation Barbarossa as the effort of the “national-imperial elite” of, to use Vollmann’s term, Europe Central to ward off the “Jewish-Bolshevik-Mongol-pestilence” (Baird, “The Myth of Stalingrad,” 203). This viewpoint obviously harbors the danger, as Žižek rightfully notes, of relegating fascism to a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree evil, a mere reaction against the Soviet threat. For Callinicos, Operation Barbarossa resembled an “Anti-Bolshevik crusade supported by the upper-classes of continental Europe to eradicate the ‘Red Menace’” (Alex Callinicos, “Plumbing the Depth: Marxism and the Holocaust,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (2001): 391), while Strachey sees fascism as such as “one of the methods that may be adopted by the capitalist class when the threat of the working class to the stability of monopoly capitalism becomes acute” (qtd. in: Callinicos, “Plumbing the Depth,” 391).

29. This is also what makes them plausible tragic characters, for a tragic individual must realize the ambiguous nature of his actions and face the ethical dilemma resulting from them.

30. Paulus and Vlasov are introduced to the reader in a series of dialectical encounters that each resembles a distinct stage in the character's development, thereby locating the genesis of their historical memory in individual responses to a trying event. In both cases the experience of complete encirclement and entrapment leads to the breakdown of ideological obedience. For Vlasov, for example, the dismemberment of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Shock Army and his subsequent escape on foot are as important stages in his dialectical education as the discovery of the mass grave and his marriage to Heidi, his German wife. By highlighting moments of personal crisis, the novel emphasizes that individual action and its historical representation, although potentially different from, or even opposed to, the historiographic account of a collective remains significant. But, to locate the pivotal sources of historical representation in individual actions also means that personal choices and decisions, even in an extreme situation like Stalingrad, must not only be subject to historical evaluation but also ethical scrutiny.

31. In reality, Vlasov refused to accept an airlift out of the pocket and was captured on July 12, 1942 after his hide out was revealed to the Germans by a local farmer.

32. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 270.

33. *Ibid*, 279.

34. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 286.

35. *Ibid*.

36. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 301.

37. *Ibid*, 298.

38. *Ibid*, 299. Heidi's and Vlasov's relationship is also part of Vollmann's discourse on fascist femininity. Heidi resembles the prototypical Nazi-woman. She is completely obedient and devoted to her husband, while aspiring to only one thing: giving birth to children for the *Führer*, and earning a Mother's Cross. She even proposes that a man like Vlasov "deserves two wives" (*Ibid*). Heidi's comment hints on the *Lebensborn* project, which was designed to encourage "truly Aryan" men and women to have children in order to guarantee the prosperity of an ethnically and genetically perfect German race. Dorothee Schmitz-Köster describes the function of the *Lebensborn* project by saying:

*Ihr Ziel war die Beförderung der Kinderproduktion nach deutschem Reinheitsgebot. Frauen und Männer 'guten Blutes' sollten sich zum Wohle der 'nordischen Rasse' und des 'deutschen Übermenschen' rege vermehren und eine 'erbgesunde,' 'arisch' einwandfreie Nachkommenschaft bzw. SS-Elite heranzüchten (Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit ... Alltag im Lebensborn (Berlin: Aufbau, 1997), 1).*

39. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 267.

40. *Ibid*.

41. *Ibid*, 304.

42. In reality, Vlasov never discovered a mass grave nor did he embrace fascism. Although Vollmann's portrait of Vlasov utilizes many neatly and accurately researched details, the Russian general, in fact, "preserved his dignity and his policies throughout [and] [h]e refused to identify himself with the German cause" (Clark, *Barbarossa*, 408).

43. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 394.
44. Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Mankind* (Munich: R. Piper, 1958), 84.
45. Wieder, *Stalingrad: Memories and Reassessments*, 191-192.
46. Quoted in Larry McCaffrey, "An Interview with William T. Vollmann," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 20.
47. If the dialectically overcoming of individualism within fascist ideology depends on the recognition of the subject by the dictator, then Stalinism represents already the next phase of this Hegelian thought in that it has already abandoned the notion of the individual and subordinates the dictator himself to the larger system of Communism.
48. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 356.
49. *Ibid.*, 272.
50. In his recent biography of Paulus, *Das Trauma von Stalingrad* (2008), historian Torsten Diedrich recounts this bizarre detail of the German surrender and the reaction of the Russian delegates:
- Paulus habe sich selbst zur Privatperson deklariert. Paulus kam auch der sowjetischen Aufforderung nach Kapitulation des Nordkessels mit dem Hinweis nicht nach, er sei nicht mehr dessen Befehlshaber. Die sowjetischen Vertreter verstanden nur Bahnhof* (Torsten Diedrich, *Paulus: Das Trauma von Stalingrad* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh, 2008), 293).
51. Vollmann, *Europe Central*, 403.
52. James Crossley, "Europe Central," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 25.2 (2005): 137.

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