

December

Alexander Kluge and Gerhard Richter



Gerhard Richter

5 December 1942: In order to explain the principle, said Heiner Müller, why Stalingrad was on the one hand historically necessary and on the other, from the perspective of human beings, not at all, I have to tell a fictitious story.

Captain Sopotka, Viennese by birth, was transferred to Stalingrad as late as December 1942, thanks to the incompetence of the army administration. Those who in October had initialled the transfer memo knew nothing of the encirclement. He landed at Pitomnik airfield in the middle of a snowstorm. Only days before he had been bathing in the mild winter waters of the Mediterranean at Catania.

He had missed out on all the learning processes in the Stalingrad pocket, had not been subject to the physical emaciation which had already begun in September. He now arrived in the pocket with a fresh view of things. A parachute division, had it been dropped on the winter surface, equipped with special winter clothing and large quantities of ammunition, would have been in the same good spirits and have guaranteed the defense of Stalingrad until early March.

Sopotka, said Müller, becoming more animated, was shocked by the virtually doctrinaire belief of his comrades in the encircled area in their own misfortune. As transport officer, he immediately took charge of snow-clearing duties on the relief airstrip at Stalingradski. Following the suggestion of Air Force Field Marshal Milch, five to seven new airfields were to be organized from scratch in the pocket and that within three days. Sopotka's vigor, which derived solely from the fact that he had arrived there from another current of reality, was transmitted to his small team. He swept them along. He planned to graduate as an engineer the following year and to take a training course to fly transport planes. Sopotka's clear spirit did not dominate anything more than the narrow radius of the small airstrip which was still in the same condition in which the Russians had abandoned it in the autumn. It was even impossible to rouse from their lethargy the wireless operators at Pitomnik who maintained radiotelephone communication with the forward air base from which aircraft started for the pocket. So no transport planes were directed to the now cleared runway.

On 24 January, the small group organized by Sopotka was overrun. The Red Army was not interested in the mental state of those it left lying to right and left. Sopotka's corpse was in a group of dead, leant up against a layered heap of snow, distinguishable from the other dead only in that the layer of fat under his skin still appeared intact.

Key word: BASILISK GAZE. The merchants in the Netherlands, says Müller, were not well versed in the exercise of power and stood back when Alba had Count Egmont executed. They didn't read the signs. The GDR (East Germany) capitulated in just the same way. Yesterday Valentin Falin visited me, Müller continued. Falin was not at Stalingrad himself. But he had probably read every line in the Kremlin's secret files about it. According to them, the Russian commanders assumed they had surrounded 86,000 men in their surprise attack. In fact it was 300,000. In terms of numbers, there were never more troops in the encircling front than there were Germans in the pocket. What causes an army committed to lightning war to declare itself defenseless within a matter of two months? The battle is decided, says Müller, in the heads of the fighters.

Recently at my house a cat was seen watching a bird on a treetop and, after they had locked gazes for some time, the bird let itself fall as if dead between the cat's paws, either intoxicated by its own imagination or drawn by some attracting power of the cat.

—Montaigne, “Of the Power of the Imagination” (*Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Works*, Donald Frame trans., London, 2003).



Gerhard Richter

9 December 1941: Because the classes of the Cathedral Grammar School and of the Martineum, both of which had to vacate their buildings, have to share the same temporary premises, lessons take place in the afternoon.

After that we fan out to collect scrap metal. There is one point for a kilo of iron, seven points for zinc, three for copper and six for tin. For forty points we receive a commendation. We rarely find tin. Zinc, that's toothpaste tubes. Copper we find in scrapped electrical appliances. Guided by our teachers, we collect raw materials for the armaments of the Reich.

Dimmed electric light behind the windows of the houses. The strict blackout does not begin until 7 PM. The light sources correspond to the energy in our ambitious hearts. How invigorating the cold air we draw into our lungs! Now we are not yet soldiers. Now we are not yet dead. On handcarts we pull a heavy load which we have brought together from the cellars and attics of the houses. We are taking a hundredweight engine block through the snow. We have removed posts and iron spikes of an ornamental railing.



Gerhard Richter

11 December 1944: WARSAW DURING ADVENT. An unusual mood prevailed among the “last victors of the Third Reich” (as the commanders in Warsaw who had crushed the uprising of the Polish Home Army called themselves). There was not much they could do with the ‘power’ they had. Power without time. Later they knew that it was rule for another thirty days—how could one adapt to that?

Their power was all-embracing. In a sense it was free of inhibitions, because no time remained for any possible accountability. These were weeks of invention; experiences were collected. For when? Futility does not diminish the mistakes.

What might have been practical occurred to only a few. They could use these days to prepare themselves for the tribunals of the victors, the Poles who would soon be in power. They could get the files ready for that point in time; they could acquire friends if they were still able to find an enemy who could be won for them by favors or preferential treatment. They could deflect earlier guilt onto other departments, other jurisdictions. This obvious use of the days did not take place. It frequently happened that someone started a new life on the fat of the land.

The German quarters were intact. In Zolikow, additional villas were seized, more were taken over. Army Chief Administrative Officer Schmücker, a man of taste, carted seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture to the storeroom of a tobacco factory. There had never been such riches. He managed to see off a train, loaded with exquisite items, in the direction of a mine shaft in the Harz Mountains. The man, who would never have been able to acquire such valuable objects himself, carried the shipment list, signed by the responsible rail official, in his breast pocket.

In the Bristol Hotel, which was integrated into the fortress structure of the German government district, Lieutenant-General Stahel wrote his famous report, based on his experiences, on “Combating Insurgency in a City of Stone-Built Houses.” The headings were structured according to “correct” and “wrong.” An agent with a background in poetry, whom the Polish Home Army had infiltrated into Stahel’s staff, later translated this record, put down in writing by the practiced oppressor. Later still, this report was the basis of the stock of knowledge of the Polish secret services about the suppression of urban insurrections, a report which today in Iraq arouses the envy of the CIA.

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