

# Sacrifice and Dehumanization in Plievier's *Stalingrad*

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THOSE OF US WHO LIVED through the dark days of World War II may have some difficulty reading the "fiction" of Nazi aggression without the intrusion of memory. Images of German soldiers goose-stepping their way across Europe, grinding their tanks over soil not their own, laying waste to villages and cities, and carrying out with cold-blooded precision the wanton slaughter of millions of human beings—all lie deep in the modern consciousness. For a while the earth seemed to tremble beneath the sway of mighty conquerors who had come to believe they were indeed the master race. In their savagely inglorious battle of Stalingrad, however, the Nazis suffered an irreversible military and moral defeat, all illusion gone. On July 28, 1942, Josef Stalin broadcast an urgent message to the Soviet people: "Not another step back! We must defend every inch of Soviet territory to the last drop of our blood!" (Vasilevsky 143). His appeal to patriotism did not go unheeded. When the guns fell silent at last (February 2, 1943), a shattered German army lay buried on the plains of Stalingrad.

Theodore Plievier's imaginative recreation of the battle of Stalingrad portrays a nation's sacrifice of its men as a triumph of madness. The story is told from the German point of view. The Russian presence is felt, but the reader does not see the thousands of Russian soldiers and civilians who endured the nine hundred days' siege of Stalingrad,

defending their city against overpowering odds; nor does he see the multitudes among them who perished from German shells and bombs, starvation and cold. What he does see are the catastrophic consequences of the Russian counter offensive, narrated with the sweep and intensity of epic, and a relentlessly brutal realism. The German battlefield is ultimately a vision of hell frozen into a solid mass of men, machines, and earth. "Brief glory, vanished riches, lost war," laments a field commander who had arrived among the first and filled his bunker with loot from Stalingrad (*Stalingrad* 265).

Near the close of the novel, Plievier shrouds in bitter metaphor the Nazis' progress to the East and the German High Command's willful destruction of German soldiers:

Until this city was reached, it had all been an extravagance and a Herculean jest, a procession with fireworks, hunts, and human sacrifices, a gory sightseeing tour through many countries, a Ship of Fools setting out for the unknown under an imbecile captain. Only at the finish, on the last stretch of the way, had the participants realized that they themselves were the fat steer with gilded horns and adorned with colorful ribbons which was being led to the slaughter. Up to now it had not been serious; now the great reversal began. (336)

The gradual awakening of individuals to the horror of their death trap becomes a microcosm of their nation's tragic course. Through the symbolism of the Icarian flight and fall, together with an intricate network of entombment imagery, the author imparts a sense of the Germans' shared aspiration of world conquest and, in the end, their plunge to the greatest depths of human betrayal and savagery.

Plievier's choice of the Icarian symbolism is significant. Although the Greek figures of Icarus and Daedalus are not mentioned in the novel, the author suggests that because the Nazis, like Icarus, flew too close to the sun, their fall was inevitable. According to Theodore Rosznak, "The very purpose of myth is to provide the randomness of events with instructive order, so that intellect is not abandoned to the chaos of time" (162). *Stalingrad* thus represents the end of a mythic cycle, a moment in time portrayed against the pattern of eternity. Further, at the close of the novel Plievier points to the beginning of another cycle; for the survivors of Stalingrad make a conscious choice to live, and thus defeat the Nazi system that had brought them to the nadir of existence. Without the mythic structure, the events depicted in *Stalingrad* would leave nothing certain except chaos and destruction.

Plievier successfully combines panoramic reporting on military events and minute description of individual experiences, from General von Paulus, commander of the German Sixth Army, to members of a penal battalion. *Stalingrad* opens with the final days of the German siege, the moment of crisis, and follows the historical outline of events. In the novel, the Russians begin their counter offensive on November 19, 1942, and within a few days they completely encircle the German soldiers, cutting off their rear action and pushing them into the iron ring between the Volga and the Don. On November 22, Hitler orders General von Paulus to hold the line of defense at all costs. Five top military experts advise against such a measure. The great number of soldiers, the difficult weather, the flying distance, and the barren landscape exposing the slow transport planes to Russian ground defenses—these factors, they argue, will make the air supply a hazardous undertaking. Reich Marshal Göring assumes full

responsibility for the air supply, vowing to overcome all odds, and Hitler issues the order. At this moment the field commanders know their men are doomed, but they obey.

After fifty-one days of fighting, the worst fears of the German officers are realized. The loss of 150,000 men is bitter proof of the failed air supply and of the impossibility of success in this inhuman effort. On January 10, 1943, the Russians offer the German army humane and reasonable terms of surrender. Hitler rejects the offer and orders the army to stand where it is. To save the lives of the remaining men, General von Paulus requests permission to capitulate, stating categorically that the fortress cannot hold. When Hitler's response comes, the fate of the German army is sealed: "Capitulation out of the question" (224). The deaths continue to multiply at a horrifying rate, not only from battle but from disease, starvation, freezing, and suicide. On General von Paulus falls the burden of conscience: "He suffers like Christ on the cross," remarks a staff officer, "and yet he will carry out the order" (225).

As the crisis descends upon the whole Nazi enterprise, Göring plans a symbolic funeral in Berlin for the entire Sixth Army, a mammoth force of 330,000 soldiers, 10,000 officers, twenty-four generals, and the commander himself. No one will survive to tell the tale. "They died that Germany might live"—so runs the propaganda, an attempt to cover up one of the worst disasters in military history by turning it into a glorified sacrifice for the Nazi dream of world domination. In the cellars of Stalingrad, amid cries of help and shrieks of pain, wounded and dying soldiers listen to a radio broadcast of Göring's speech: "*We have a mighty epic of an incomparable struggle, the struggle of the Nibelungs. They too stood to the last . . .*" (298). For some of the soldiers, this sudden insight merely adds to an agonizing death the knowledge that they are dying for a

contemptible cause. In Göring's hollow words they hear the death knell of their nation.

The order is never rescinded. Within twenty-three days, however, General von Paulus capitulates (February 2, 1943). He divests himself of military status and issues no orders to his forces, choosing instead to surrender as a civilian. The capitulation takes its course, with 91,000 beaten and tattered German soldiers streaming in from all corners of the battlefield. By surrendering as a civilian, General von Paulus removes himself from the military process and thus guarantees a consistency of policy. Only an hour before his surrender, he bows to his superior's command; he will hold, he says, to the last man. In the end, however, he cannot obey:

Sacrifice is conceivable, he realized suddenly, only when it is done for the sake of one's own soil, for the preservation of one's own people. But it was impossible to try to glorify an unsuccessful marauding expedition by making an idealistic sacrifice. (330)

With more than 200,000 German corpses strewn on the battlefield, the wonder is that his insight comes now so "suddenly." General von Paulus has always known that his forces, locked inside the iron ring, serve no real military purpose. Plievier describes, "dispassionately, authentically and with a remorseless but tender poetry," the progressive physical and moral disintegration of the German Sixth Army (Rev. of *Stalingrad* 413). The execution squads alone continue to function efficiently to the end.

Plievier's focus on the Russian counter offensive rather than on the Nazis' protracted siege of Stalingrad renders more powerfully the theme of Germany's desperation and imminent fall. In his variation on the myth of Icarus, the

author depicts the intoxication of power which carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. By Christmas 1942, the first deaths occur from dysentery, exhaustion, and starvation. In a field hospital Viktor Huth, a young doctor, makes his nightly rounds. Then he goes outside to the sheep stable, small mud huts which house an additional four dozen sick and dying soldiers. Because it is Christmas night, each hut has a Hindenburg light, a makeshift candle that burns for an hour or so. The doctor comes upon Georg Ketteler, an older man whose rapid physical deterioration restores to his face the countenance of a young boy's innocence. He awakens from a spell of delirium and says, "Doc, doc, I was flying the way I never could before. Do you know how to get the gift of flight, doctor?" (49).

Huth listens to the soldier's dream-version of the tale. In a great city, Georg begins, full of lights and movement and people, magic creatures are in the street and whoever touches one in passing will receive the gift. The fairy of his dream was in the form of a little girl wearing a ragged dress. She had been leading a blind man: "But what did I care," he says, "I had the gift" (50). Ketteler recounts his own intoxication with battle and the history of a devastated army. At the height of his power he had swum on the surface of the atmosphere: "The sea of air below him was a blue expanse; there was a patch of yellow dust where the desert began. . . . Rivers, woods, farmlands, steppes were spread out beneath him; everything belonged to him and he could descend wherever he wished" (50). Ketteler knows, as does the doctor, that the dream was a gigantic game, a reveling in his own strength. He knows too that the story does not end well. "But what did I care," says Ketteler, "I had the gift."

The dreamer ignores the ominous signs of the poor girl with the blind man and his own boundless folly. And then the unthinkable happens:

By chance the swimmer dipped his head into the gleaming ocean of air and his own eyes were blinded. Numbness seized his limbs as well and he sank precipitately, plunged down like a stone. And then he lay in blackest darkness and around him and within him was a murmurousness and stirring, and close by someone told him what was wrong with his stomach—that it was just a nest full of little mice living inside there. (50)

Viktor Huth perceives in the dream the simplest imaginable form of both the soldier's own experience and a great social upheaval:

For it was all quite true—faith in the extraordinary gift, the reckless reveling in the new powers, the ruthlessness toward another who was, into the bargain, the giver of the gift; it was all true, including the inevitable giving out of the power at the moment of its greatest effort and the inevitable fall. (50)

As the Hindenburg light flickers in the sheep stable, leaving the suffering men in darkness, the doctor sits holding the dying soldier's hand. A small Russian plane arrives with its nightly load of bombs and in the distance guns begin to fire. "But what did I care," the doctor thinks, "I had the gift" (51). Later that night Huth again goes to the mud huts, but they are now enveloped in a frozen stillness. When his duty is over and he falls asleep at last, he is still thinking, "What did I care, I had the gift" (53).

Viktor Huth had received the gift, but only now does he realize the high price that he and others must pay. Because Hitler had removed Jewish doctors from the hospitals,

young doctors were needed to fill the vacuum. Regardless of the examination score, no one could be allowed to fail. But for these circumstances, Huth might never have passed the examination. He was apolitical, interested in everything from concerts to athletic events, psychoanalysis to Chinese lyric poetry, and very little interested in medicine. But now, “with hands that had once dreamed of painting and that had longed to produce living beauty and perfection” (43), he works on an unending stream of battered German bodies. He stands in German blood, extracts bullets and shrapnel from German flesh, and finally throws the severed limbs and broken bodies of German soldiers into a deep pit behind the field hospital. The “eternal student” who has seemed to be interested in everything except medicine passes the real test during his first night of medical practice, a sleepless night that extends into forty-two hours. In the course of the battle, the doctor tries to save the remaining soldiers from senseless slaughter by appealing to various officers for capitulation. In Viktor Huth lies the truth of Joseph Campbell’s observation that myths of failure touch us with the tragedy of life (*Hero* 206).

Through the actions of the major characters Plievier exposes the fallacy of the Nazi doctrine of racial superiority. The logical outgrowth of such a doctrine—and its most grievous crime—is the loss of humanity. Once the idea of master race is pushed to its logical conclusion and the character of a people is exalted to a god-like dominion over lesser beings, defeated soldiers lose their own sense of purpose and become inured to the suffering of others. Sick or wounded comrades are perceived as weak specimens of humanity, and hence undeserving of life; helpless, ignored, and left to suffer alone, they die like carrions. When food, clothing, and medicine are gone, and all hope vanishes, the soldiers turn against each other. Catherine Ann Cline expresses the sorrow of Plievier’s theme when she writes,

“the greatest Nazi crime was not the destruction of men’s bodies but the corruption of their souls” (124).

Because the main characters dare to raise the significant questions, not only about the Stalingrad disaster but about the principle of human regression inherent in Nazism, they are the symbolic preservers of life. The opening sentence of the novel, “FIRST THERE WAS GNOTKE,” is followed eight pages later by “AND THERE WAS VILSHOFEN.” At the close of the novel, August Gnotke and Manfred Vilshofen come out of the ravine where they have been sitting and talking about life beyond Stalingrad. Moving away from their dead comrades, they join the masses of defeated soldiers marching to prison through the snow: “It was the track of two men walking side by side” (357), one a former SS sergeant and the other a former commander of a panzer regiment. They too had received the terrible gift but finally reject it, a measure of their evolving humanity. Gnotke and Vilshofen represent Germany’s best hope of redemption. One reviewer, however, strikes at the heart of the novel when he asks,

How can such men as Gnotke and Vilshofen bring their message to a morally debauched people? *Stalingrad* carries that message, and with it a searing vision of the nemesis that waits upon arrogance and inhumanity. (Rolo 119)

*Stalingrad* opens on a November day covered with fog, mist, and snow. In a dream-like silence, the “death men” of the penal battalion, among them August Gnotke and his passive friend Matthias Gimpf, go out to bury the dead. Moving about like phantoms, they dig the graves, fill them with sixteen cubic yards of German corpses, and then begin anew. Gnotke holds no rank and wears no insignia. He has served in the disciplinary battalion ten months, a punishment

for his refusal to obey orders during the previous winter and the Moscow campaign. The penal battalion is not attached to any particular group but shifts around to perform the most difficult and dangerous work, including mine clearance and gravedigging under enemy fire. These soldiers receive no pay; they are allowed no light in their quarters; and they cannot associate with other soldiers, except in the line of duty. Gnotke and Gimpf almost lose the habit of talking. They no longer expect warmth or light, no longer hope for anything. In spite of these dehumanized conditions, or perhaps because of them, an unspoken care and compassion unite the two soldiers.

Gimpf, a former SS soldier, serves in the penal battalion for having failed to remove his hands from his pockets and click his heels before a regimental commander, omissions which were considered unsoldierly. But Gnotke intuits that something more profound than this present punishment torments Gimpf, who constantly stares into space. His blank face causes Gnotke to think of him with affection as "a cracked bell that would not ring" (46). Gnotke looks after Gimpf as though he were a helpless child, even bathing his feet in warm water and warning him that sound feet are more important than a sound mind. During a Russian mortar attack that lasts more than three hours, the men lie huddled and cramped in a foxhole. One of the soldiers asks Gimpf where he got his boots with the thick fur lining, and he responds: "Gnotke gave 'em to me on account of my frozen foot" (84). This small exchange takes place while some of the men go mad, others die, and still others hope to die.

Manfred Vilshofen, first a colonel and later a general, initially commands a panzer regiment, a force of twenty-six tanks which the Russians quickly reduce to four. In the early descriptions of Vilshofen, Plievier portrays the stereotypical Nazi commander who embodies the New Germany, "the new world that was to arise out of blood and tears . . . the

might that sought to shatter and crush the independence and will of other nations” (8). The symbol of consummate military might soon give way, however, to an image of a man who cares not only about the efficient operation of his tanks but also about the morale and well-being of his men. Vilshofen knows his soldiers by name, their homes and families; he encourages them and sympathizes with them. But now, after two wars, and at forty-eight years of age, he begins to question the direction his nation is taking. In the course of the Stalingrad disaster, Vilshofen functions as theologian, voicing the agonizing doubts of German soldiers concerning their mission, past, present, and future.

After the destruction of his panzer regiment, Vilshofen is assigned a small combat group and ordered to take and hold five Scythian burial mounds in the Kasachi Hills. In his underground shelter, he meets with a captain, a lieutenant, and a technical sergeant. When, with the four remaining tanks, they are ready to depart on their mission, Vilshofen stands, shakes hands with the three men, and says, “May God protect you!” (77). The involuntary expression, rather than the customary “Heil Hitler,” does not surprise the men; no one seems to notice the omission. Later, Vilshofen leaves his command post and goes to the front line where, as he realizes, the men are doomed. He asks them what they would do if they had the choice. Lie down and never move again, desert, surrender—these are the soldiers’ forthright responses. He gives the men the opportunity to desert, without interference of any kind, but advises that if they feel surrender is necessary, “all should do it together in recognition of the general situation” (80). When Vilshofen returns to the shelter, he can see one burial mound rise against the horizon. The narrator’s description expresses symbolically the soldiers’ isolation and abandonment, the loneliness of their own grave:

It was still before dawn; darkness hung heavily  
in the ravine and fog drifted over the icy land.  
Beyond the burial mound a star shone through  
the mist. (81)

In the chaos of constantly shifting battlelines, the author brings the major characters together in a convincing fictional strategy. Soon after Hitler's rejection of the Russians' terms of surrender, five German divisions begin fleeing toward Stalingrad. Vilshofen and his weary, decimated group, cut off from the rest of the army, engage in an exchange of artillery fire with Russian infantry. The battleline is drawn down the middle of Viktor Huth's clearing station. Outraged by the senseless killing of the injured men within, the doctor demands that Colonel Vilshofen raise the white flag. Until this point, Vilshofen has entertained only vague notions about the vastness of the German army's operation and its ever-receding goal. The medical lieutenant, Vilshofen thinks, deserves "a summary court-martial and execution on the spot" (88). But he does not shoot Huth, perhaps because, as the narrator concludes, the young doctor's words awaken thoughts that Vilshofen himself had "turned over subconsciously" (88).

After the defeat at the Scythian burial mounds, Vilshofen's image of defeated German soldiers takes the form of the Icarian flight and fall, a recognition of the Nazi myth of invincibility:

Blue sky and plunging down from the sky a dark  
ball. But the ball was talons, wings, ruffled  
plumage. A shower of feathers and it was over.  
(116)

The image remains with Vilshofen. Later, when he touches the eagle on his adjutant's uniform, the national emblem of

the new German Reich, he angrily remarks that a crow would be a more appropriate emblem: “. . . it sits, fat and swollen and beating its wings on the edge of our death trap” (123). As the situation becomes progressively horrendous, and Vilshofen sees his own position as indefensible, he says to a group of officers, “. . . whenever a man dies senselessly here, Germany dies with him!” (204). Later in the novel, after rejecting the prospect of suicide for the sake of a “cheap opportunist” (268), Vilshofen perceives in the Stalingrad obscenity not only his own complicity, but also the whole German military machine as an embodiment of the people’s soul:

Every piece of iron had to be forged into a cannon, a rifle barrel, a shell. Every scrap of leather, every thread of cloth, everything without exception had to serve one single purpose and one alone—shooting and being shot at. Total war. We knew better, but we believed... [Hitler] when he told us that only we Germans could do it. (275)

Vilshofen’s meeting with August Gnotke, like his confrontation with Viktor Huth, serves to humanize the officer. During the retreat, the men assigned to Vilshofen’s newly-organized combat unit appear before him as a dismal procession of “human ruins” (118), among them a few survivors from the penal battalion. With his rank and insignia now restored Gnotke, upon questioning, tells Vilshofen that he has just arrived from Pitomnik; and before then, he was in Dmitrevka, Moscow, the *Sturm Abteilung*, and at home in Klein-Stepenitz in Pomerania. Again, upon questioning, Gnotke talks about his friend Gimpf, who always wants to lie at the bottom of a hole and never get up again and does not “give a damn about anything” (119).

Gnotke's concern for Gimpf strikes a responsive chord in Vilshofen who, only moments before, had considered himself lost. A human being is never lost, he reflects, if he can still be concerned for his fellow men, "even if it were only one of his comrades" (120). Vilshofen later remarks to his adjutant that Gnotke's "hands are good for something besides hauling off the dead" (122). In Gnotke he perceives not only the principle of survival, but of survival with purpose beyond Stalingrad.

Gnotke and Gimpf remain together until the close of the novel, at which time the cause of Gimpf's tortured soul is revealed. Before he dies from typhus, Gimpf tells his story to Gnotke and Vilshofen. He had been in the guards detachment overseeing a shipment of Russian prisoners from Vyazma to Smolensk. From the 15,000 prisoners who began the journey, only two thousand survived. The others died along the way, old men, women, and children, all helpless, all shot. The Germans would throw their caps out into the snow and when they ran to get them back they were shot. It was at this point that Gimpf had lost his grasp on reality, as his story makes clear:

. . . Two kids with their fur caps and little mittens like clumsy little puppies . . . must have been about four years old. They straggled behind and fell and couldn't get up again. Captain Steinmetz ordered the kids shot and Sergeant Leopold carried out the order. . . . After that there were three more and I carried out the order. . . . Captain Steinmetz gave the order about the caps and we took the prisoners' caps away. (345)

Through Gimpf's soul-shocked experience, Plievier points to the Nazis' policies and actions as a subversion of natural order. "Matthias Gimpf died," the narrator concludes,

“having not yet begun to live. His life had come to a dead stop in the deep powdery snow on the road from Vyazma to Smolensk” (347).

The loss of human dignity and worth in *Stalingrad* recalls Lear’s vision of unaccommodated man. German military policy mandates that the dead be stripped of their uniforms, caps, and boots; and as sub-zero weather descends upon Stalingrad, the dead are denied a burial blanket. When the frozen ground makes gravedigging impossible, German corpses must be abandoned to the Russian winter. Hunger drives men to crawl in the snow to a dead horse, only to be shot by Russian soldiers. However, Plievier’s depiction of the Nazis’ reign of terror as a complicitous enterprise is unrelenting. The first soldier who comes down with typhus knows from experience the radical procedures for containing the disease: a bullet in the back of the neck and a grave fourteen feet deep covered over with quicklime. Now that the sick man has become the object of methods for extermination that were practiced upon infected inmates of camps and civilians, he goes mad, lashing out at his comrades in a torrent of violence. Yet this same victim had walked unmoved by gallows from which men and women dangled and, without a twinge of conscience, he had driven by anti-tank ditches filled with executed civilians and prisoners of war. Scenes such as these cause Gnotke to prefer his work in the graves where the dead “showed their gaping wounds, their glazed eyes, their gut; some of them grinned . . . but they did not talk and they no longer hoped for anything” (56).

As the novel begins with the grave, so it expands into a vast network of entombment imagery. Foxholes and snowholes, bunkers and caverns, cellars and ditches—the battlefield of Stalingrad emerges as a universe of death. Plievier heaps detail upon detail to impress the theme of a nation’s betrayal of its soldiers and their progressive

dehumanization. German tanks roll over German soldiers in foxholes. German skulls are cracked open and the brains eaten. A soldier removes his comrade's boot and his foot breaks off. Inside a canvas-covered truck lie twenty or thirty wounded men whose blankets, blood-soaked clothes, and bandages have frozen into a solid mass; when the trucks become frozen and immobile, the drivers and ambulance men abandon the wounded. As a plane waits to evacuate wounded men, thirty-eight of the critically wounded are trampled to death; in a desperate effort to board the plane, others are heaped on the thirty-eight. Bodies are piled so high that they are used as a ramp, and the victors—the guards themselves—have “to stoop to get into the cabin” (137). Through the cumulative effect of detail Plievier creates a piercing vision of Germany's ultimate madness, its self-imposed destruction.

Near the end of the catastrophe, when both medical supplies and medical assistance are expended, wounded men crowd into the central garrison headquarters. Through the symbolism of the Icarian myth, one officer expresses the intolerable suffering of the soldiers:

Were those human voices or did the building hold in captivity large birds, imprisoned in cage upon cage piled three stories high and in the three wings of the structure, birds that fluttered madly against the walls and fell back to the floor again as shattered, dark lumps with bleeding beaks and broken wings, able only to utter wild, inarticulate cries? What was it? Was it a vast aviary full of dying birds? (315)

The scene is reminiscent of the labyrinth from which Icarus flew to freedom on wings devised by his father Daedalus, the “Skillhand.” For these soldiers, however, the gift of

flight has run its course. An officer who observes the terror of the doomed soldiers returns to his men in the street with "the screeching, fluttering, and tramping" still pounding in his ears; "and when he again passed by the starlit heap he knew what was inside there: it was Death" (315-16).

The composite role of fifteen or more subsidiary characters reinforces the theme of betrayal and anguish. Alexander Klein contends that, even though Gnotke and Vilshofen emerge most clearly as individuals, in the final analysis they are "monstrosities, insufficiently humanized to cast more than a shadow on the epic backdrop against which they are portrayed" (22). Given the moral evolution and human qualities of these characters, this assessment is difficult to accept. Early in the novel Vilshofen begins to question the senseless death of his soldiers; he never disclaims his own responsibility in bringing this army "to scrap, pulverized"; and thus he comes to understand the source of the "German disease" (356). While the generals opposed Hitler because he was losing the war, Vilshofen condemns him for having begun the war (350). Through his characters Plievier creates the tension between the demands of military discipline and the no-surrender decree that makes criminals of German officers.

Gnotke, too, acknowledges that he is not altogether guiltless. As a storm trooper until 1934, he must share the blame for the many Gimpfs who died. A few years earlier he would not have looked on his comrades as human beings but rather as cogs in a giant machine of destruction: "He felt responsible for the dark destinies of others and knew the harm he had once done when he too fought in the streets" (350). Both Vilshofen and Gnotke recognize their former intoxication with power, but they also perceive the blindness and inevitable "shower of feathers" in the fall. Joseph Campbell reminds us that tragedy is "the shattering of forms and of our attachment to the forms" (*Hero* 28). In

Vilshofen's concern for his nation and Gnotke's innate goodness lie the hope of Germany's restored forms.

Diana Trilling finds Plievier's political solution through love to be wholly inadequate. The conditions of a "desperately ill society," she believes, require more than the kind of "unnamed and unasking love of man for man" as exemplified in the novel. Because this kind of love can neither be gained for the asking nor sustained through governance, she concludes that Plievier is moving toward a religious position (555-56). The author's choice of Christmas Eve for the dying soldier's tale of the magic gift of flight tends to support this view. However, Trilling fails to take into account Plievier's ironic mode. The traditional manger scene of Christ's birth is substituted with a sheep stable where German soldiers die. The birth of Christ symbolized mercy and compassion, humility and love; it promised a new kingdom of heaven on earth and immortality. The death of German soldiers is, by contrast, without meaning. Their heroism is based on illusion and, as one reviewer states, the characters are "the victims, never the masters of their fate" (Rev. of *Stalingrad* 413). The dehumanized god of their worship has consigned them to a merciless death, without hope of anything.

*Stalingrad* depicts the kind of intuitive love that may extend beyond man himself, but the novel is ultimately an appeal to reason, not emotion. The author invites us to participate in the flight and fall, the causes and consequences. On one level the novel chronicles the death of an army, "no army, [but] only a battlefield, exhausted, lice-ridden, bloodless, enervated mass of men" (114). On another level lies the greater tragedy of an empty sacrifice. As despairing officers strive to save their honor through self-destruction, so Vilshofen, the professional soldier, contemplates suicide; and Gnotke, having survived a thousand deaths, wants to die in the ravine, like Gimpf. But in the end Vilshofen and

Gnotke refuse to vindicate the Nazi regime. Plievier's revelation of interests common to mankind thus extends far beyond the Nazi military catastrophe at Stalingrad. His depiction of fundamentals smashed has a shattering impact: it reveals the fragile forms which bind civilization.

It is difficult to believe that this novel was not written by a German soldier, a survivor of the battle of Stalingrad, so intensely realistic is the firsthand account. Plievier was a German, but he emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1933, when Hitler came to power; in the following year the Nazis revoked his citizenship in the same order that cast out Albert Einstein. During the war, he broadcast anti-Nazi propaganda to Germany. Fascinated by the Russian army, Plievier made frequent visits to the front line, experiences which he combined with interviews with German prisoners of war to create the realism of his novel ("Plievier" 23). His description of the Russian winter imparts more the sense of a soldier's actual experience than that of a detached observer's reporting. Sounds of frozen human limbs snapping like icicles permeate scenes of intense suffering.

In one of the most grueling scenes of the novel, Plievier describes the  $-40^{\circ}$  temperature in terms of the straggling men's desperation to climb aboard one of thirty retreating trucks. The terrain itself combines beauty and horror: "It was a wasteland of white, dry powder, of wind-swept billows and lavish filigree work" (98). In spite of the column of moving trucks and the shrieks of men, the scene of the gorge, "with its precipitous sides so white and frozen" (99), has a hushed quality about it. Along the roadside are abandoned trucks and wounded, dying men. Starkly etched against the glare of headlights are the men on foot, waving and gesturing, and at the last moment darting out of the way of the rushing vehicle. From the cab of his truck one young officer watches a "shape" slide down the road toward him: "He saw it fall forward on its

face as its feet snapped off like pieces of glass" (100). But this soldier is not alone. With the elegiac refrain, "those who still had feet," Plievier describes the large band of similar shapes. The men throw themselves on the truck, clinging to anything they can find, with "hands tearing the canvas top, gripping faces and eyes, pulling other men back"(100). As the narrator remarks, this scene is reminiscent of the Ice Age: "All this took place not three hundred thousand years before our era, but on the night of January 12, 1943, on the Karpovka-Pitomik road" (100). In the end, the author suggests, the frozen land may have contributed as much to the German defeat as the Russian armed forces.

Plievier became disillusioned with the Soviet Union, though not with communism, and in 1947 he returned to Germany by way of the Soviet Sector. From there he took refuge in American-occupied Bavaria. Upon his death at age sixty-three, March 12, 1955, *The New York Times* described him as an "idealist disillusioned" (23). By a curious irony of cultural and literary history, Plievier became a best-selling author in Germany before his work was known elsewhere. In 1948, when *Stalingrad* appeared in this country, Diana Trilling wrote that it was "the first novel of this war to portray German soldiers as human beings capable of a full range of human suffering instead of as contrivances; puppets of their political fate" (555). In the final analysis, then, *Stalingrad* is a novel about war, not politics. The few Russians in the novel appear in stylized form: the prisoners used as "pack Russians" and the Russian officers attendant upon the capitulation.

In its convulsive power, *Stalingrad* is a passionate protest against war. Near the close of the novel, Plievier gives to Vilshofen the important questions concerning the kind of law that provides for the killing of helpless people. Like an epic lament on the death of a culture, he asks: "Is it the law

of the German people, the same people who brought forth a Guttenberg, a Matthias Grünwald, a Martin Luther, a Beethoven, an Immanuel Kant? Is it the law of a creative people living by the fruits of its own creations? Did the German people have no other political face to show the world?" (347). Plievier introduces the questions, but he suggests that in the shared quest for answers lies the possibility of a people redeemed: "It was not the end of the tragedy," concludes the narrator, "but it was the close of an act" (352).

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