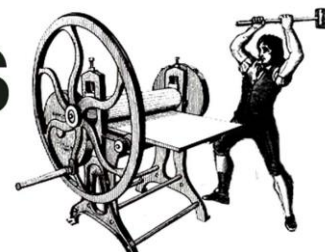


# The Shade of Swords

"Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured. And every young farmboy knows that the hardest and noblest wood has the narrowest rings, that high on the mountains and in continuing danger the most indestructible, the strongest, the ideal trees grow."

(Herman Hesse, Bäume)

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**Jean Casseur**

*Know that Paradise is under the shades of swords.*

*Sahih Bukhari, 4:52:73*

In the east of the Netherlands, amid endless flat plains, lies a small village inhabited by a few thousand people. A single road, flanked by an old Catholic church, two pubs, and a supermarket, traverses the entire length of the settlement which is a little under a mile long. Crime is virtually absent, the average income equals the national average. Most houses have a small front yard and are of the semi-detached housing type that characterizes the former rural villages that are now largely populated by middle-class commuters. The days there are endless and all alike, marked by rain and empty swings on the school playground.

In the summer of 2004, an unremarkable kid with a penchant for Soulfly and Nirvana t-shirts just finished high school. His yearbook quote reads, "I'm 16 years old. I have no idea what to do after I graduate but I wish all of you the best in life." After graduating he lives with his parents and spends his days delivering mail throughout the village and drinking on the weekends. A blog entry from 2005 reads "Holy fuck, I'm bored! I've been staring out of the window for days with nobody passing. What a load of shit, I want some action, something to happen."

Eight years later, the kid (who is now no longer a kid) sports a bald head and long red beard. He wears a *djellaba* and looks into the camera with an empty intensity. "Hi Dad, hi Mom. This is a personal message to you. This message means I am no longer in the Netherlands. I have heeded the call of Allah, revealed in the Qur'an." Amid the ruins of Aleppo, the kid, who probably never met a Muslim his entire life growing up, explains how he discovered the Qur'an amid the media-frenzy around the far-right Freedom Party's campaign against immigration and Islam. He recalls a particular night, at a party, where he feels disgusted with all around him, wandering around drunk with a total lack of purpose or direction. How the suffocation of the village, the placid security it offered, and the endless cycle of meaningless repetition that gnawed at him started to fall away in the light of the *shahada*. Soon, a fire starts to burn inside him that leads him to make contact with radical jihadists. Isolated in his bedroom, in between his mail delivery rounds and the increasingly infrequent drinking, the internet opens the door to a world pregnant with meaning and an intensity he had never encountered before. He starts devouring the works of Sayyid Qutb and severs all contact with his old friends. Finally, he boards a flight to Turkey and travels in secret to Syria to meet up with operatives of either Jabha Al-Islamia or Jabhat Al-Nusra. In his last video message he mentions he never plans to come home. If he doesn't become a martyr in Syria, if he will see the fall of Al-Assad and the foundation of the Caliphate, he will travel to Iraq to continue down the path of the sword. It is unclear whether the kid is still alive. After his last video message there has been complete radio silence. Whatever his fate, it seems he knows what to do now.

## Footnotes

[1] See "The History of Subsumption," *Endnotes 2* (2010): 130-52. Online: <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-history-of-subsumption>

[2] Jacques Camatte, "Against Domestication," in *This World We Must Leave and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 109.

[3] *Ibid.*, 95-96.

[4] Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Penguin, 1961), 99.

[5] Ernst Jünger, "Total Mobilization," trans. Joel Golb and Richard Wolin, in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992). 119-39.

[6] See Mark Neocleus, "Long Live Death! Fascism, Resurrection, Immortality," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10:1 (Feb. 2005): 39.

[7] Martin Heidegger, "Schlageter," in *The Heidegger Controversy*, 40-41.

[8] See <http://unisetca.ipower.com/qutb/>

[9] Tiqqun, "Theses on the Terrible Community" (pamphlet), available at <http://petroleusepress.com/post/654927992/everyone-knows-the-terrible-communities-having>

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Erich Maria Remarque, *The Black Obelisk*, trans. Denver Lindley (New York: Random House, 1998), 95.

mythical companionship of jihadi brethren without the perpetual existence of the *Dar Al-Harb*, the house of war, that external enemy that spurs on the battle.

Even if the terrible community is for its inhabitants like a cathedral in the desert, it is within the community that one endures the bitterest exile. Because as a one-sided war machine which must maintain with the exterior a vital homeostatic equilibrium, the terrible community cannot tolerate within its ranks the circulation of any discourse that puts it in danger. To perpetuate itself, the terrible community needs to relegate the danger outwards: it will be the Foreigner, the Competition, the Enemy, the Cops.[10]

This truth seeped through, subconsciously, in the last statement of the Dutch jihadist. Already he spoke of the fall of Al-Assad and the establishment of the Caliphate only to promise to move on to another war upon its very founding.

For Remarque, who portrayed the struggles of the “lost generation” of 1914 to re-integrate in a society that neither had a place for them nor was itself able to recover from the trauma of the war, the community of comrades on the front was less something to laud in itself than the last remnant of humanity and belonging the broken and battered had to cling onto. The nature of these communities is illustrated by the irony that Jünger himself never at all appeared to have any close or meaningful relationship with any fellow soldier in particular, only with the abstract idea of their community and its ideology. During the war, high soldier turnover and casualty rates on the front made it both physically and psychologically impossible to develop meaningful, deep connections beyond those thrown up by necessity. The soldiers’ newspapers, one of the primary sources of the notion of *Frontsoldaten Bruderschaft*, were largely produced by older enlisted soldiers stationed in more peaceful sectors. After the war, the experiences of the front left nothing but a dark blight on Germany, and soon the comradeship held together by the fire and steel of the trenches would shatter under the turmoil of the Weimar Republic, pitting veteran against veteran from the soldiers’ councils to the *Freikorps*. Both in and after the war, the “community” of soldiers was, like the mirage of the Caliphate, nothing but a *Notgemeinschaft* that could not exist outside of the war and offered nothing but the war and the consolation of a sense of meaning produced by its merciless sacrificial engine.

In *The Black Obelisk*, Remarque somberly concludes that:

Perhaps there is really nothing else when everything is falling to pieces, I think, except this bit of togetherness and even that is a sweet deception, for when someone else really needs you, you cannot follow him or stand by him. I have noticed that often enough in the war when I looked into the face of a dead comrade. Each one of us has his own death and must suffer it alone; no one can help him then.[11]

The kid is far from alone. Intelligence agencies estimate thousands of foreign fighters from Western Europe have flocked to Syria and Iraq to heed the calls to arms of the various jihadist organizations operating there, prime among them the Islamic State and its millenarian vision of an ever-spreading Caliphate. Unlike the pre-existing jihadist networks and cells that have flocked to the area, or the Chechen militants who grew up in a tradition of Islamist insurgency spanning generations, the young men and (to a lesser extent) women, who desert their homes in the West don’t fit any clear-cut profile. Reports from various European intelligence agencies mention how they comprise both men and women, both well-educated middle class and kids from rough neighborhoods with a criminal past, and both people with a European background and 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation immigrants. Most of them seem to be only superficially familiar with the core tenets of Islam.

What is it that these young men and women, growing up in the tranquil comfort of the heartlands of this supposed “best of all possible worlds,” hope to find amid the rubble and corpses of Aleppo? Why do thousands leave the supposed suburban dream to fight and die under the banner of a brutal racket whose appearance and ideology seems like some atavistic shadow out of time?

Among the many interviews, documentaries, and video messages about and from “foreign fighters” in Syria there is a fragment of two Belgian jihadists discussing what motivates them to stay, fighting a bloody turf war in a largely deserted city to which they have no connection. The conversation initially focuses on theological duty, a sense of humanitarian empathy for the victims of the Al-Assad regime and frustration of western foreign policy, the usual talking points. But it soon strays into talking about day-to-day militant life. How here, on the front lines of a hopeless war, they have found a community of believers who eat together, pray together, tend to each other’s wounds, and cover each other’s back in battle. As one British jihadist put it: “We are like a single body, if one part suffers, the others react.” What these wandering souls hope to find among the ruins and the dead of the Levant is something to believe in, something that saturates each action with a perennial meaning that overshadows the fleeting and the transient, a community worth living and dying for and held together by something other than the rule of gold.

Meanwhile, news anchors, “decent citizens,” and politicians from the left to the right are foaming at the mouth over the looming danger posed by this “enemy within.” Anti-terror legislation, anti-radicalization campaigns and an even bigger boost to the omnipresent surveillance apparatus are supposed to turn the tide, to stamp out this rot that has infected the very core of paradise. But what they will never understand is that it is this very society that they so desperately seek to protect, with its ritualized work-party-sleep-repeat cycle, its endless sequence of hyped non-events and its almost totalitarian imperative to “enjoy,” which produces its own nightmares. When middle class youth from sleepy villages in the heartlands of Europe decide to take up arms for a brutal racket offering little more than a sea of beheadings and a death under the unforgiving Levantine sun, little else is left to be said about the supposed “triumph” of progress, capitalism and liberal democracy. In the words of a Canadian imam whose

young students took off to fight for the IS: “When you don’t find purpose and meaning in life, the only thing you look forward to is death.”

## Viva la muerte!

The dynamics and historical trajectory of contemporary jihadism are not of importance here. While a primary factor in the rise of the IS is essentially its role as a Sunni militia in a region engaged in ever-further fractalizing sectarian chaos spurred on by local and international geopolitical maneuvering, this is not what drives most foreign fighters. And it certainly does not motivate those who have no ethnic, cultural, or pre-existing religious ties to the conflict. It is not tribal identification with the average Sunni victimized by either the Al-Assad or Al-Maliki regimes that drives them, nor is it a long-standing history of engagement with radical Salafism. In fact, the latter has been identified by cultural policy think-tanks and intelligence agencies alike as an inhibitory factor for participation in armed jihad. The ultra-conservative radical Salafists are far too concerned with theological differences, social isolationism, and preaching, or they simply prefer to participate in financial or humanitarian aid from afar. No, what drives these young combatants are sleekly produced videos of line upon line of Toyota pickup trucks waving the black banner as they proclaim the coming of the Caliphate. What drives them is the image of self-proclaimed caliph Abu-bakr Al Baghdadi, the “invisible sheikh,” dressed completely in sober black as he announces the arrival of a world resurrected from a distant past. What drives them are images of combatants—no *brethren*—fighting side by side set to millenarian nasheeds telling of the advent of the Mahdi whose coming would be signaled by the black standards proceeding from Khorasan. What drives them is the idea of embracing death as part of a resurgent *true ummah*, to die with purpose and not among strangers as a forgettable byproduct of the economy.

Drunk on their own ideological wine, the political commentators ask themselves, “But do we not offer the most loving of communities? The warm and soft embrace of the modern world? The endless freedom to be whatever one wants, to make all the meaning there is in the world? Just do it! Because I’m worth it!” Obviously, the facts speak for themselves here. What all the demographically inclusive feel-good commercials in the world cannot hide is the gaping hole at the center of everything from which the emptiness oozes forth. It cannot be acknowledged or seen because looking at it is like looking at the radiant sun.

The French communist Jacques Camatte once said that “all human history is that of the loss of its community.” He described the aftermath of the destruction of that primordial “primitive communism” and its human community that characterized the earliest human societies and the subsequent march of class society as the “wandering of humanity.” This wandering is the story of the fragmentation of human communities into stratified formations with corresponding social divisions of labor, of the increasing alienation of people from their daily activities, their environment and themselves. Of these wanderings, capital is the greatest transformative social force

in the ideological pantheon of jihadism and so does his relation to the practice of *takfir*. After all, the particularities of theological quarrels between Qutbism and Wahhabi orthodoxy are of no interest or simply completely lost on the type of foreign fighter that literally arrives in Aleppo with a copy of *Islam for Dummies* in their backpack. What concerned parents, fundamentalist but non-violent clerics and social workers alike don’t get when they proclaim in disbelief “But why fight? Why not devote yourself to aid work if the suffering of the *ummah* weighs so heavily upon you?,” is that it is not the actual *ummah* that those foreign fighters go off to die for. It is the distant mirage of the coming Caliphate, the establishment of the *true ummah*. It is that fever dream of dying a martyr in the service of a perfect community (because it is, as of yet, a non-existent community, though one already pregnant with the meaning bestowed upon it precisely because of this mountain of sacrifice) of which one can only get a glimpse in this world through the lens of the companionship of the jihadi brethren and that paradise to be found in the shade of swords.

But these communities so desperately sought after by the foreign jihadists and so lauded by the likes of Jünger are nothing but smoke and mirrors, something in line with what the French philosophical journal *Tiqqun* called “terrible communities”:

One enters the terrible community because, in the desert, the searcher finds nothing else as he passes through this temporary, faltering, human architecture. At first, one falls in love and enters, feeling that the community was built on tears and suffering and that more is called for to continue its existence; but that matters little. The terrible community is foremost a place for devotion, and that is moving, that awakens the “caring reflex.”

But the relationships within terrible community are worn. They were no longer young, alas! when we arrived. Like stones in a riverbed where the water runs too fast, the looks, the gestures, the attention, are all used up. Something is tragically missing from the life of the terrible community because there is no more room for indulgence, and friendship, so many times betrayed, is extended with extreme parsimony.

Like it or not, those who pass through, and those who arrive, pay for the misdeeds of others. The people they would love are already too visibly damaged to pay any mind to their good intentions “With time, goes...” The wariness of others must be overcome, more precisely one must learn to be as wary as the others, so that the terrible community can open its emaciated arms again. It is the capacity to be hard with new arrivals, finally that will demonstrate solidarity with the terrible community.[9]

In their wanderings in the literal desert, the foreign jihadis see in the embryonic Caliphate the promise of a community that can give them meaning, even if it is only as a sacrifice at its altar. Those who have nothing to lose give this nothing to the terrible community. And meaning-through-death is all these war communities, these cults of grandiose suicide, have to offer because they exist only in war. The ties that bind their social life are the product of the management of an economy of war. There is no

The entire meaning of Schlageter's life and death is condensed in this single image, the notion of dying as a sacrifice to the future awakening of the *Volk*. This triad of death-community-meaning recurs again and again in the imagery of both (para-)fascism and jihadism and goes beyond commemoration and grief to become the essence of life as exemplified in the Falangist slogan *Viva la muerte!*

## *Jahiliyyah*

While contemporary jihadism is a diverse landscape with many conflicting theological disputes, its relation to one concept in particular sticks out as a unifying factor: *takfir*. *Takfir*, roughly comparable to excommunication, is the act of declaring someone a *non-believer*. There are many different views on the practice, but in general an unfounded *takfir* is considered a major sin especially as it is seen as a prime source of intra-Muslim strife. Sayyid Qutb, whose works play a central role in the ideology of contemporary jihadism, particular that of Al-Qaeda, asserted that today the *ummah*, the Muslim community, had been extinct for centuries, it had fallen into *jahiliyyah*, a term commonly used to denote the state of ignorance one lives in before encountering Islam. The sole exception to this generalized *takfir* is Qutb's proposed Islamic vanguard, the *tali'a*, modelled after the companions of Muhammad which would serve as the model of a new world:

We are also surrounded by *jahiliyyah* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws—is *jahiliyyah*, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of *jahiliyyah!*

[...]

It is therefore necessary—in the way of the Islamic movement—that in the early stages of our training and education we should remove ourselves from all the influences of the *jahiliyyah* in which we live and from which we derive benefits. We must return to that pure source from which those people derived their guidance, the source which is free from any mixing or pollution. We must return to it to derive from it our concepts of the nature of the universe, the nature of human existence, and the relationship of these two with the Perfect, the Real Being, God Most High. From it we must also derive our concepts of life, our principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life.[8]

While Qutb's writings have been criticized by more orthodox fundamentalists of the Salafi and Wahabbi variety and are at times in direct conflict with the ideas and practices of various jihadist groups (Qutb, for example, held that slavery was now illegal under Islam, something traditionalist Saudi clerics have criticized him for and which directly contradicts both the practices and positions of the IS) he remains central

history has ever witnessed. It bulldozes everything that stands in its path and transforms all within reach, remaking it in its own image. It is the grand uprooter and holds nothing and nobody sacred, for “all that is solid melts into air.” More than ever before, all community is subsumed by the dictates of Capital's impersonal logic as its uprooting motion not only subjects entire societies but also draws them inward, qualitatively transforming them. This process of the qualitative transformation of human social relations is sometimes known as real subsumption or real domination.[1] Whereas under so-called *formal* domination one relates largely externally to capital, say a former subsistence farmer now selling produce on the market, under *real* domination the productive process itself (and as a result, the social relations and social life it produces) is transformed by the demands of capital. Life and mankind itself are pulled into capital's interior and digested by it.

The human being under real domination is a modular human being, forever an appendage to the intertwining processes of production and consumption and their particular configurations. Like a macabre Mr. Potato Head, the modular human being has no attachments that cannot be shed as easily as they were acquired. Nothing is true to it that cannot be exchanged for something equally true (that is, equally exchangeable). Friends become a *social network*, convictions and aesthetic tastes become a *personal brand*. Likewise, the human being belongs nowhere, but it does belong *to capital*. The more fanatical it becomes about nationalist banalities such as the “demise of the West” or the “destruction of traditional European culture,” while tweeting from a McDonalds no less, the more it reveals how desperate it is to *belong*. A little more endearing but just as tragic is the 21<sup>st</sup> century flowerchild who spends their time between the beanbag chairs of a tech office in Silicon Valley and the acid-fuelled drum circles of Burning Man, wondering why neither feel quite like the close-knit tribe they want it to be. It is not that the modular human being is essentially born in this fashion, it is that it is whipped and lashed into shape or, failing that, thrown away as human debris (in its prisons, mental institutions, or gutters), a social production error. Under capital's real domination there is no other community than that of capital. It is both the skies and the sole horizon, and the mechanistic motions passing for life that play out within its barren interior are “death organized with all the appearances of life. Here it is not a question of death as the extinction of life, but death-in-life, death with all the substance and power of life. The human being is dead and is no more than a ritual of capital.”[2]

It is this endless wandering, this sense of meaningless *non-belonging* that seems to saturate every fiber of modern life, that stirs the hearts of those kids, who have never before in their lives fired a gun, who embark on international jihad. Camatte saw that even fascism (maybe especially fascism) drew its strength from its promises of overcoming this essential brokenness of the world:

It takes diverse forms, but it has a profoundly consistent basis and is surprisingly uniform wherever human populations are found. Thus by seeking to restore (and install) the *Volksgemeinschaft*, even the Nazis represent an attempt to create such a community (cf. also their ideology of the *Urmensch*, the “original man”). We believe

that the phenomenon of Nazism is widely misunderstood: it is seen by many people only as a demonic expression of totalitarianism. But the Nazis in Germany had reintroduced an old theme originally theorized by German sociologists like Tönnies and Max Weber. And so in response, we find the Frankfurt school, and most notably Adorno, dealing in empty and sterile concepts of “democracy”, due to their incapacity to understand the phenomenon of Nazism. They have been unable to grasp Marx’s great insight, which was that he posed the necessity of reforming the community, and that he recognised that this reformation must involve the whole of humanity.[3]

This search for belonging and the reformation of community, in the form of a community-in-war, was a particularly strong theme among Europe’s interbellum veterans. While polar opposites in many respects, the 20<sup>th</sup> century German writers Ernst Jünger and Erich Maria Remarque both dealt heavily with the comradeship of the (former) *Frontsoldaten*. From letters to literature to soldiers’ newspapers, the notion of tightknit bands of *Brüder* fighting either a just or senseless war (but always together) resurfaces time and again as a cohesive element. In *Storm of Steel* Jünger recalls the following episode:

Soon we were completely wrapped in smoke and dust, but most of the shells came down just behind or just in front of our trench, if one can use that word for our smashed hollow. As the storm raged around us, I walked up and down my sector. The men had fixed bayonets. They stood stony and motionless, rifle in hand, on the front edge of the dip, gazing into the field. Now and then, by the light of a flare, I saw steel helmet by steel helmet, blade by glinting blade, and I was overcome by a feeling of invulnerability. We might be crushed, but surely we could not be conquered.[4]

Jünger’s work is permeated with this sense of “cold, steeled” comradeship that ought to serve as an antidote to the decadence and futility of bourgeois society and its ennui. While purportedly the war, a *just* war, is fought for the nation and its glory and survival, it is in fact the *Frontkämpfer* community itself that forms the actual focal point. For Jünger, no one had died in vain in those muddy and forlorn trenches that littered the landscapes of Verdun and the Somme: “There, where such blood has flowed, is where an inheritance is assumed and beginnings are to be seen. Whether the war is won or lost: that has not happened in vain.” The masses that leapt to their deaths amid clouds of poison gas had died working toward a new mode of life whose crystallized essence was to be found in the nexus formed by the war-communities on the frontlines. To Jünger, these men and the way of life they found in war represented nothing less than a new race, as exemplified in this particular quote from “Total Mobilization”:

Today, through the cracks and seams of Babel’s tower, we can already see a glacier-world; this sight makes the bravest spirits tremble. Before long, the age of progress will seem as puzzling as the mysteries of an Egyptian dynasty. In that era, however, the world celebrated one of those triumphs that endow victory, for a moment, with the aura of eternity. More menacing than Hannibal, with all too mighty fists, somber armies had knocked on the gates of its great cities and fortified channels.

In the crater’s depths, the last war possessed a meaning no arithmetic can master. The volunteer sensed it in his exultation, the German demon’s voice bursting forth mightily, the exhaustion of the old values being united with an unconscious longing for a new life. Who would have imagined that these sons of a materialistic generation could have greeted death with such ardor?

[...]

This is confirmed by the agitation around us which is the mark of the new race: one that cannot be satisfied by any of this world’s ideas nor any image of the past. A fruitful anarchy reigns here, which is born from the elements of earth and fire, and which hides within itself the seeds of a new form of domination. Here a new form of armament stands revealed, one which strives to forge its weapons from purer and harder metals that prove impervious to all resistance.”[5]

While both arch-reactionaries, neither Jünger nor the ideologues of contemporary jihadism were or are fascists. Fascism, as a movement, is a very specific historical phenomenon and as an ideology it orbits the notion of palingenetic ultranationalism, something irreconcilable with either the various strains of Jihadism or Jünger’s particular brand of reaction. But what all of them do share with fascism is its central relationship between death and community. The theme of the immortality of the martyr runs through the core narratives of fascism from *the fallen soldier* and the myth of Langemarck to the “Horst-Wessel-Lied” and the *Blutfahne*. From Italian fascism, where relics of fallen militants were kept in local party shrines and their names would be shouted during roll-calls followed by a collective bellowing of *Presente!* to the Nazi *Ehrentempel* at the Königsplatz holding the remains of those killed during the Beer Hall Putsch, the cult of death and martyrdom permeates it. As Goebbels once said, fascists “knew how to die.”[6]

Virtually all religions (including those that call themselves politics) deal with death by integrating the fallen into the community, by having them live on in the world of collective memory. In fascism in particular, their lives gain meaning either before or after their passing, through the subsumption of their deaths by the community and in turn the community gains meaning and weight through the mountain of sacrifices in its name. A prime example is the Nazi treatment of the legacy of Albert Leo Schlageter, a veteran and former Freikorps volunteer who was captured and executed while sabotaging French occupation troops in the Ruhr area. Schlageter did not die the traditional hero’s death but, in the appraising words of Martin Heidegger he:

died the most difficult of all deaths. Not in the front line as the leader of his field artillery battery, not in the tumult of an attack, and not in a grim defensive action—no, he stood defenseless before the French rifles. [...] In his most difficult hour, he had also to achieve the greatest thing of which man is capable. Alone, drawing on his own inner strength, he had to place before his soul an image of the future awakening of the Volk to honor and greatness so that he could die believing in this future.[7]