Encountering War in the Letters from the Front. Eastern Front, 1941-1944

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The letters sent from the front during WWII constitute a broad universe which we are just partially familiar with (tens of thousands of letters out of billions). Only a very small portion of the immense corpus of letters from and to the fronts has been published, which means that such a form of testimony constitutes an important but also distorted means of encounter with war. Do therefore letters constitute a good means for encountering war? Do people at home really come across war, when they read the letters received from their loved ones at the front? The testimony provided by a letter from the front is complex and ambiguous insofar as it differs both from autobiographical texts written after the events in the form of a narrative and from diaries, which are basically private writings with an open and discontinuous narrative structure. Letters from the front imply the presence of a defined reader, normally the family, relatives, friends etc. of the combatants who write. Letters are first of all life-signals that combatants exchange with their families back home. Therefore, they also imply a sort of dialogue dislocated in space and delayed in time, which affects communication and the flow of information. Moreover, letters from the front are subject to censorship, which limits the freedom of the writers to express their minds openly. Finally, combatants tend to present themselves in their letters as individuals who struggle to balance their experience of violence and suffering with the ideas, expectations and sets of values of their relatives at home. Combatants cannot and dare not report the reality of their daily life in war directly to their relatives without applying some language-filter. Letters from the front line must first of all keep the dialogue between combatants and their society as it existed before the war alive (Letzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*: 30). Such a dialogue is irregular and ambiguous, though, because, on the one hand, censorship prevents it from being spontaneous and, on the other hand, self-censorship represents the psychological device by which the system of values shared with family and friends is protected from the potential harm resulting from direct representation of the war. Insofar as censorship prevents the combatants from expressing freely their own thoughts and from revealing classified or secret aspects of the war, the relationship between combatants and censorship has two faces: on the one hand the soldiers try to escape control by avoiding prohibited topics; sometimes, conversely, they use the keywords of propaganda in order to "smuggle" opinion and information which should not be put into writing. This is the reason why one often

comes across letters which appear oddly propagandistic, discordant with private communication. Most of the times, such an attitude is a subtle way of "cheating" censorship, which urges the recipient to read between the lines.

In the German letters sent home from Russia in 1941, the invasion at first appears as a just war waged in self-defence against communism and the "Judaic-Bolshevik" plot. For many German soldiers, the war and the annihilation of the Red Army would impede the "red beasts" to reach Germany, thus they represented that total annihilation-war as a cause worth fighting and death. The soldiers of the Wehrmacht often considered themselves as liberators and restorers of Catholicism in Russia, which they depicted as a backward country populated by uncivilised inhabitants. Nonetheless, perplexity and fear do emerge from the letters of these combatants as long as they advanced deeper into enemy territory and witnessed a cruel war conducted relentlessly against civilians, POWs and Jews. No writer openly refers to these misdeeds, which was prohibited by censorship: they just write that the war is demanding more than mere physical effort and courage in battle: obedience, faith, endurance and determination therefore assume a secret meaning, insofar as the combatants try to tell (ambiguously and indirectly) that they are experiencing unexpected war crimes from which they cannot call themselves off. Shootings, hangings, deportation, forced labour, mass mortality from starvation and disease among the Russian POWs hardly made their way into the letters, because any admission that the conflict in the East was a criminal extermination war, would undermine the moral link between the combatants and their families, from which the former received the signal of a normal life, so they made every effort to send back a representation of their daily life as much normal, by removing all reference to violence and horror.

But the brutality of the war in Russia took its toll on the soldiers. Beside the restrain of censorship, self-censorship represented a constant attitude of the combatants to face a moral crisis, as soon as they began to recognise in their comrades a glimpse of the bandit and raider, or to understand that the series of victories was turning into defeat. The language of letters bears the scars of such internal conflict. The combatants, by writing that their condition was "beyond description" and by promising that one day they would tell everything in person at home, put a distance between themselves and the events, thus concealing their moral struggle. Silence was therefore all but mute: if blackened lines in censored letters show that the State could control and transform dissent into coerced consent, silence imposed by self-censorship was rather a blank to fill with interpretation.

Silence as *refusal* to speak about the war means that the encounter with war was so shocking that it had to be framed within a discourse of apparent normality. Which also means that the language of letters would deny people at home the possibility to actually encounter war and to understand what was going on at the front. In situations of extreme danger like in Stalingrad or in other great battles in 1943-1944, combatants found it very difficult to conceal reality. In the letters written under life-threatening conditions of extreme suffering and fear, the combination of censorship and self-censorship became highly problematic, because the attempt to escape through writing stood in open contradiction with experience, and this created violent swings in language. One can find, in fact, strong oppositions between expressions of hope and despair, or between appeals to calm, often dictated with a strained enthusiasm, and crude descriptions of a hopeless condition.

Silence therefore became a form of complicity. It occurred first of all as ellipsis (denial), but it could also occur as understatement and irony. There were two different types of self-censorship: the first was a rational precautionary reaction to the presence of the military censorship and to its restrictions. Silence or the displacement of information was not aimed at interrupting the communication totally; the writers wanted to be understood by their recipients but not by censors. This was the reason for the promises to speak in person at home, for cryptic symbols (e.g. a circle with a point inside, to mean the encirclement of the German 6th Army in Stalingrad) and other allusions.

The second case was that of total and impenetrable silence, when the combatants passed over entire parts of their daily life and experience in silence simply by writing about other things, until their letters conveyed an image of the war tampered with as though those aspects of violence and horror had never existed at all. Adjectives like "inconceivable", "indescribable" and "unimaginable" represent the limit beyond which silence became total. It was no longer a matter of "I cannot say this because it is forbidden"; the war had to be radically transformed into a bearable experience that the reader at home could handle, comprehend and eventually justify in order to believe that their loved ones would eventually come back home as they once were.

The readers of letters encountered war through a thick filter of linguistic and ideological manipulation: they encountered the "soft" version of the war depicted and tampered with by the combatants themselves, who quite usually arranged their representations as a compact pack of standardised communication, in which life-signal appeared as the most important and urgent content to communicate. "I am still alive

and in good shape and spirit" was likely to be in the end the most useful and consolatory thing to write and read.

But war, despite its distorted images, changes and affects the combatants for the rest of their lives and urges them to constantly arrange the story in order to make sense of it and to make it bearable and acceptable. Self-censorship in the letters is first of all a symptom of the pursue not much for a true and authentic account but rather for consent and self-acknowledgement aimed at permitting, after the war, the return of the veterans into the circle of their community as civilians. Therefore, one can see the letters from the front as a first stage of the attempt to stretch a bridge over the gap between war and those civilians who, away from it at home, can only imagine it through the official representations of propaganda and those unorthodox of letters and first-hand oral accounts made by veterans when they come home on leave. Many Germans became aware of the actual situation in the East by listening to the accounts that the veterans made in secret: crimes, extermination of the Jews, the defeat in Stalingrad, the general retreat in 1944 were taboos that the Nazi propaganda tried to keep secret. Through the letters from the front many German families encountered a war that they had never imagined, although a war still tampered with. Perhaps, only after 1945 silence in the letters began to make sense, when defeat opened the eyes of the majority, as one veteran wrote:

> *"In retrospect, I realized that I – and countless others like me – had helped Hitler start and fight a world war of conquest that had left tens millions of people dead and destroyed our own country. I wondered now whether I would ever question these things if we had won the war. I had to conclude that it was unlikely. This was a lesson taught by defeat, not by victory"* (Knappe and Brusaw, *Soldat*: 298).

References and further reading

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