

# Warfare, Reason, and Moral Truths

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## The "Sublimity" of Warfare

In the first appendix to his short treatise *Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant speaks of war. He writes: "War itself requires no special motive but appears to be engrafted on human nature; it passes even for something noble.... Often war is waged only in order to show valour; thus an inner dignity is ascribed to war itself, and even some philosophers have praised it as an ennoblement of humanity."<sup>1</sup> Kant clearly sees war as a violation of the moral law within. Yet his talk here of war being able to "pass for something noble," of war for some as "an ennoblement of humanity," and even of war as comprising "an inner dignity" recalls his earlier, even more striking, claim in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). There, Kant writes: "Even war has something sublime about it if it is carried on in an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizens' rights. At the same time it makes the way of thinking of a people that carries it on in this way all the more sublime in proportion to the number of dangers in the face of which it courageously stood its ground."<sup>2</sup>

With these puzzling observations in mind, I would like to investigate briefly just what sense we can make of Kant's astonishing, even shocking, remarks that war may properly be taken as something sublime. My central concern is to attract fresh philosophical attention to still neglected conceptions that may be put at the service of our efforts today to rethink the cardinal concerns of a philosophical ethics for societies like our own that are in the midst of what I would call a cultural revolution. At the end of our own bloodiest of centuries, however, I shall set aside Kant's naive suppositions that wars can be carried on "in an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizens' rights." Rather, I shall take my inspiration from Kant's much darker anthropological allusions here to what he obscurely calls "human nature." I will foreground his terrifyingly prescient remarks about "men who are so inclined that they should destroy each other and thus find perpetual peace in the vast grave that swallows both the atrocities and their perpetrators."<sup>3</sup> I begin with an historical description of one central instance only of twentieth-century warfare.

From July 11–13 of 1943, in what many historians today hold to be the essential turning point of the Second World War, Soviet Marshall Grigori Zhukhov's defensive strategies for achieving an implacable attrition in the Kursk Salient in Ukraine in one of the greatest tank battles in history slowly and terribly ground down Field Marshall Erich von Manstein's unremitting yet reluctant offensive just to the west of Voronezh in eighteen hours of horrendous suffering in the "slaughter of Prokhorovka." Hitler had planned his "Operation Citadel" originally for April, then gave orders for the operation to begin in May, then again postponed the operation repeatedly. Operation

Citadel finally began on July 5, 1943.<sup>4</sup> Eight days later, Citadel was "cancelled." In fact, Citadel was destroyed to the west of Voronezh on the rolling black terrain, in the *balki* and on the open plains around Ponyri and Olkhovatka to the north of Kursk, and Oboyan, Belgorad, and Prokhorovka to the south, in "a battle," historian Alan Bullock qualifies, "of an indescribable fury and horror."<sup>5</sup> The reports of the key battle at Prokhorovka on both the Soviet and Nazi sides are indeed terrifying. Military historian John Erickson summarizes some of the still extant voluminous battle reports: "Both sides were ... furiously stoking the giant glowing furnace of the battle of Kursk.... The armour continued to mass more and more on a scale unlike anything seen anywhere else in the war. [And] both commands watched this fiery escalation with grim, numbed fascination."<sup>6</sup>

After the preceding days of enormous struggles, destruction, and killings, the crucial battle from July 11–13 was fought largely in "high driving winds and great bouts of rain" over river-streaked fields of corn and rye, skies dark with dive bombing Stukas and Shturmoviks, thunderous barrages of Nebelwerfer and "Katyusha" rockets screaming down, and more than a thousand tanks roaring, clattering, slam-stopping, firing, and then, when hit, exploding themselves—newer panzers exploiting their long-range cannon shots, older Soviet tanks stripping their gears and racing their breaking engines to crash into the panzers and dissolve in fiery maelstroms of tank-hunting teams staggering out from overrun and collapsing slit trenches to throw Molotov cocktails on the smouldering air-intake vents on the backsides of tanks, fatally slowed in the continually erupting minefields.

What was left after the uninterruptedly savage, blood-soaked struggles that began before light and lasted well into the night eighteen hours later was the overwhelming vastness of an enormous black-smoking, rain-soaked, and diesel-reeking landscape littered with still blazing, twisted machines—"crews splayed out besides them or interred within their steel tombs, mainly fragments of men in a horrifying litter of limbs, frying-pans, shell-cases, playing-cards and stale bread," and to the south the dismembered bodies of the infantrymen strewn all over the cratered minefields around "die Blutmuehle von Belgorod."<sup>7</sup> With over fifty percent of his Fifth Guards Tank Army destroyed, Lt. General Rotmistrov looked out and saw "dead bodies, destroyed tanks, crushed guns and numerous shell cases.... There was not a single blade of grass to be seen; only burnt, black and smouldering earth throughout the entire depths of our attack—up to eight miles."<sup>8</sup> The black earth to the west of Voronezh remains even today, more than sixty years later, a terrifying place, a place still littered with unburied bones and skulls.

In August of 1992, the Austrian television network presented a controversial broadcast on similar deathfields around Stalingrad, now called Volgograd. There, from mid-November, 1942 to early February, 1943, Field Marshall

Friederich von Paulus's Sixth Army, after killing between one and two million Soviet troops, witnessed the utter destruction of its own remnant, roughly two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. A television editor, Walter Seledec, visited these battlefields in July, 1992 and returned with film crews to record what he had seen for the special program. Seledec described how "at first he did not see anything but the intense blue sky and the brown steppes. But then, as he stared across the open fields, it became clear to him that the *balki*, the gullies and slopes of the steppes, were littered with sun-bleached bones." The Austrian editor went on to say: "There in the open fields, all the way to the horizon, are the skeletons of human beings. Just lying there in the open fields. I don't mean a few. There are hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands.... Human remains lying in those fields. Human skeletons as far as the eye can see."<sup>9</sup>

The number of German and Soviet soldiers killed in the Battle of Kursk just four months after the Battle of Stalingrad is unknown. But, just as around Peshanka, so too around Ponyri, Olkhovatka, Belgorod, and Prokhorovka, the fields are also bonefields. Reburying the dead in such places will never be ended. After the melting of the snows and each spring's upheavals, still more of the uncountable dead reappear, as in Srebrenica, in fragments. Unlike the dead, however, in the horrendous battles one year later across the flooded river plains, the hedged parcels of farm land, and the fortified villages in Normandy, the bodies of those who died in the East have never been gathered up. These bodies have never been washed, towed, combed, freshly clothed and finally interred together in the groomed and flowered military cemeteries of their respective countries. Unburied even today, the countless dead in the East keep reappearing at spring to wander the earth like Palinurian shades even to the end of that bloodiest of centuries. We ask, how could such warfare, how could such a thing, ever be rightly called "sublime"? To reply, we must return briefly to Kant's work.

### A Negative Sublime?

In the pre-critical *Observations* (1764), Kant writes of the sublime as not just a feeling. Rather, the sublime is a disposition, moreover, one that occurs in a threefold guise of either the noble, the splendid, or the terrifying. That is, some things can cause distinctive effects on a perceiver's subjective capacities for having certain feelings. Following one of Kant's own very rare literary examples, the terrifying effects of Milton's representations of hell on some cultivated readers, we may provisionally link the descriptions of the tank battles at Kursk with the sublime in its guise as the terrifying. Kant's notion of a terrifyingly sublime I shall call hereafter "the negative sublime."

In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787), Kant develops his reflections on the sublime while focusing his attention on the moral realm. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), he goes on to examine the sublime in richly complicated detail as part of his much larger attempt to forge links between the moral realm of freedom and the natural realm of necessity. In exploring the idea of nature lending itself to a subjective ordering on the part of the subject in such a way as to promote indirectly the moral vocation of persons, Kant also considers the effects of the perception of some natural objects on a person's affective, and not just cognitive, powers. Kant proceeds to insist on a distinction between two kinds of mental states. On the one hand, there is restful contemplation and its simple feelings of pleasure that arise from the consideration of the form of things and, on the other, there is mental restlessness and its complex alternating feelings (first of displeasure and then of pleasure) that arise from the consideration of formless things.

This restless movement of the mind involves repeated successions of occurrent displeasurable then pleasurable affective states. Each moment of this movement begins, Kant says, with "the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful" (*CJ*, 245). Moreover, what occasions this complicated reaction is itself multiple, either the mind's different ways of trying to apprehend ungraspable magnitudes (the mathematical sublime), or its different ways of trying to apprehend ungraspable powers (the dynamical sublime). However various these kinds of the sublime, in each case Kant finds both a complex feeling of repulsion and attraction as well as either simultaneous or successive occurrent states of displeasure and pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

Centrally, in each case of the sublime the ineluctable attempt to grasp the vastness of what the mind presents exhibits how some of the mind's capacities for comprehending totalities of different kinds can outreach the limits of other mental capacities. Realizing this capacity to reach in some ways beyond certain limits of the mind, the person is finally able to recognize the supersensible nature of mind, that, as Kant says, "the mere capacity of thinking ... evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (see Pluhar's version: the "mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense") (*CJ*, 250).

Thus, what is sublime is not any terrifying object, whether actual or poetically represented, whose perception occasions these complex mental movements and feelings. Rather, matters are sublime, Kant says, only by "subreption" (*Subreption*), that is, by "a feeling of analogy that transfers a qualification to an object from a qualification of something mental" (*CJ*, 257). What is sublime is the mind itself in its supersensible aspects. Despite his comments about the moral law in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and his

comments about war in the *Critique of Judgment* and in *Perpetual Peace*, in this text Kant says that only the mind is sublime. (Still, those very supersensible aspects would seem to depend necessarily on the presentations of certain types of objects.<sup>11</sup>)

Kant's obscure doctrine of the sublime is, of course, not unproblematic. Its many conceptual deficiencies include, among others, tensions between the logical and the psychological, the doctrine of the faculties, overlappings of the moral and the aesthetic, the universal communicability of certain feelings, the taxonomies of judgment, the forms of finality and the finality of forms, talk of mental movements and complex feelings, even the focus on the supersensible.

Despite these problems, two working definitions of the sublime have been proposed. The sublime may be taken as "an experience wherein some perceptually, imaginatively, or emotionally overwhelming aspect of the sensible world serves to make the scope of specific human capacities vivid to the senses. The ground of our pleasure here consists ... of a felt harmony between the sensible world and our cognitive capacities or creative abilities." Alternatively, the sublime may be taken as "an item or set of items which, through the possession or suggestion of perceptually, imaginatively, or emotionally overwhelming properties, succeeds in rendering the scope of some human capacity vivid to the senses."<sup>12</sup>

But, however suggestive, these working definitions fail to articulate the peculiar features of the negative sublime. Remedying such inadequacies requires paying fresh attention to the nature of the idea of the sublime. Is the sublime, in Kant's terms, a rational or an aesthetic idea?

Kant distinguishes rational ideas from aesthetic ideas in the *Critique of Judgment*. In general, a rational idea, Kant writes, is "referred to a concept according to an objective principle," whereas an aesthetic idea is "referred to an intuition in accordance with a merely subjective principle." In particular, the subjective principle whereby an aesthetic idea is referred to an intuition is the "harmony of the cognitive powers" (imagination and understanding). Neither idea can yield cognition (*Erkenntnis*, i.e., the product of the process of acquiring knowledge or *Wissen*). For a rational idea "involves a concept (of the supersensible) for which a commensurate intuition can never be found" (see Pluhar: "for which no adequate intuition can ever be given"), whereas an aesthetic idea is itself an "intuition (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found" (*CJ*, 342). Thus, Kant proposes that rational ideas are "indemonstrable concepts of reason," whereas aesthetic ideas are "unexpoundable presentations of the imagination."

Aesthetic ideas are "unexpoundable" in the sense that the understanding is unable to capture with its determinate concepts the fullness of the imaginative intuition in its free play. Yet such aesthetic ideas can still be exhibited.

Moreover, aesthetic ideas have this peculiar usefulness and indispensability: they serve as regulative principles. That is, aesthetic ideas can restrain the claims of the understanding to circumscribe "the area within which all things in general are possible," to draw a definitive line, shall we say, between the living and the dead.

Kant identifies the specific capacity to exhibit aesthetic ideas as "spirit," what he calls "the animating principle in the mind" (*CJ*, 313). Spirit, then, is what produces aesthetic ideas precisely as those imaginative presentations that, Kant says, induce "much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever." Spirit is most evident, Kant holds quite unexpectedly, in poetry, of all things. For in poetry matters of everyday experience, such as friendship, love, and death, as well as rational ideas themselves, like those of creation, eternity, and immortality, are articulated in such a way that transgresses experience, that is, "with a completeness [to] which nature affords no parallel." Kant thinks the poet fashions these expressions thanks to a peculiar kind of creative imaginative activity, one that "emulates the display of reason in its attainment of a maximum" (*CJ*, 314).

This extraordinary use of the imagination Kant calls "creative" in a special sense. For the intuitive presentation of the poet's imagination enables the poet to think of more "than what can be laid hold of in that representation or clearly expressed," more "than admits of expression in a concept determined by words." In such imaginative presentations, aesthetic ideas "quicken the mind," says Kant, "by opening up for it a prospect onto a field of kindred representations" (*CJ*, 315).

Once again, whatever the many qualifications we need to make on this extravagant Kantian doctrine in the light of our very different pictures today of body, brain, and mind, this doctrine contains elements that can help us articulate the subject matter of a renewed philosophical ethics today. For this strange and almost forgotten doctrine captures both the radical contingency of the mind as well as its extraordinary ethical capacity to apprehend the aesthetic idea of the negative sublime.

The imaginative presentations of aesthetic ideas in some poetry—think of the guardian mole as the forensic pathologist in Srebrenica—shock the mind as in its initial dealings with the ungraspably great (the Kantian mathematical sublime) and the ungraspably powerful (the Kantian dynamical sublime). For the mind ceaselessly recoils from its painful encounters with the limits of its inexorable elan, just as the visual processes continuously short-circuit in, for example, the perception of Op Art paintings. In its flip-flopping, vibrating recoils the mind recognizes its irremedial incapacities to conceptualize ethically, I would like to propose, the mathematical magnitude, the ungraspable immensities of suffering, to which our own bloodiest of centuries testifies. In the same vibrating recoils the mind recognizes its irremedial incapacities

to conceptualize ethically, I would also like to propose, the dynamical magnitude, the ungraspable, overwhelming powers that continue to wreak such suffering.

Yet in its realizations of its inexorable elan to capture in determinate words what is expressible only indeterminately, the mind recognizes one of reason's desires. In its struggle to fulfill beyond the bounds of experience this desire of reason, to capture in its ethical conceptualizations the fullness of both the ungraspable immensities of suffering and the ungraspable powers that cause such suffering, the mind discovers within its restless and ever frustrated movements one of the marks of the human spirit.

The attempt to apprehend the ungraspable contents of our memorializings and imaginings of the warfare of our own era, we may say, is a desire of reason. But such a never-ending attempt is not a desire in the sense of any seriously distorted understanding of desire as an impulse toward something that promises immediate enjoyment. Rather, the desire here is a Kantian desire, a power of causing through one's own mental presentations the mediate actuality of the objects of those presentations (*CJ*, Introduction III, 177). This Kantian desire to apprehend such histories is the residue of the mind's ineluctable drive to comprehend what, rationally, can only lie, if anywhere, beyond the dark borders of reason.

Moreover, the never-ending attempt to apprehend such ungraspable realities of our own histories of war and peace is a mark of the spirit, but not in any recognizably religious sense. Rather, the mark of the spirit here is an animating, yet intermittent, sign only of a completeness and totality that, rationally, can only lie, if anywhere, beyond the dark borders of the world.

In these senses, then, the ethical idea of what is at stake in philosophical reflection on the warfare of our own times in the aftermath of the bloodiest of centuries may be taken as the negative sublime, an idea full of intimations of the overwhelming powers of a radical evil and of the whispering vastness of the still unthought immensities of human suffering, a dark kind of sublime, then, both an unfulfillable desire of reason and an ineradicable mark of the spirit.

Today, what summons philosophical ethics for renewal is the negative sublime.

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## Notes

1. *Perpetual Peace*, AK VIII, 364–5. Trans. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1957), 28–9.

2. *Critique of Judgment*, AK V, 263. Trans. W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 122. Hereafter *CJ*. Note that the text Pluhar translates is the second edition of Kant's work from 1793.
3. *Perpetual Peace*, AK VIII, 357. Trans. Beck, 19.
4. Until the end of the Soviet Union, Russia tried to place responsibility for this massacre on Nazi forces. In May, 1995, however, Stalin's order for this massacre, together with the long denied secret codicils to the Molotov-Ribbentrop document of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, were on exhibit in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. See *The Economist*, May 6, 1995.
5. Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 799.
6. John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin* (London: Weidenfield, 1983), 101.
7. *Ibid.*, 113.
8. Cited in M. Healey, *Kursk 1943* (London: Osprey, 1992), 86–7.
9. Walter Seledec, "Stalingrad: Letters from the Dead," *The New Yorker* (Feb. 1, 1993), 58.
10. On the controversial matter here of either simultaneity or succession, see R. A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 67–88.
11. See C. Fricke, *Kants Theorie der reinen Geschmacksurteils* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 141–6.
12. Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 166, 162.