Kafka on the Battlements: Fighting the Great War in "The Great Wall of China"

Václav Lucien Paris
City College New York, New York, United States.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1629-7043
E-mail: vaclavparis@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article reads Franz Kafka's 1917 story, "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" (Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer) and the related fragment "An Ancient Manuscript" (Ein Altes Blatt) in relation to World War I. It proposes that Kafka's story provides a hitherto neglected prism on the topic – and hence offers also a fresh way of conceptualizing and talking about war's place in Kafka's oeuvre and modernist literature more generally. More specifically, the article focuses on three ways in which "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" refracts the war: through its thematization of the nationalizing force of militarism; through its relations to Kafka's office writings on war trauma; and in its treatment of mistranslation and language conflict. Typically, Kafka has been framed as uninvested in war. As this article helps to show, Kafka's work was inescapably involved in complex ways with the conflict, both patriotic and critical.

KEYWORDS: World War I; Nationalism; Shellshock; Welfare; Untranslatability.

Kafka nas batalhas: Lutando na Grande Guerra na "Grande Muralha da China"

RESUMO

Este artigo avalia "Na construção da Grande Muralha da China", de Franz Kafka, de 1917 (Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer) e o fragmento relacionado "Um Manuscrito Antigo" (Ein Altes Blatt) em relação à Primeira Guerra Mundial. A história de Kafka fornece um prisma até agora negligenciado sobre o tema – e, portanto, oferece também uma nova forma de conceptualizar e falar sobre o lugar da guerra na obra de Kafka e na literatura modernista em geral. Mais especificamente, o artigo centra-se em três formas pelas quais "Na Construção da Grande Muralha da China" refrata a guerra: através da sua tematização da força nacionalizadora do militarismo; através das suas relações com os escritos de Kafka sobre o trauma da guerra; e no tratamento de erros de tradução e conflitos linguísticos. Normalmente, Kafka foi enquadrado como não tendo investido na guerra. Como este artigo demonstra, o trabalho de Kafka esteve inevitavelmente envolvido de formas complexas com o conflito, tanto de forma patriótica como crítica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Primeira Guerra Mundial; Nacionalismo; Choque pós guerra; Bem-estar; Intraduzibilidade..

In quoting this article, reference as: PARIS, Václav Lucien. Kafka on the Battlements: Fightining the Great War in the "The Great Wall of China". **Matraga**, v. 31, n. 63, p. 460-476, sept./dec. 2024.

DOI: 10.12957/matraga.2024.85062
Received in: 31/03/2024
Accepted in: 22/07/2024

Written in the spring or summer of 1917, the story "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" (Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer – hereafter simply "The Great Wall"), has an ambivalent position in Kafka's oeuvre.[1] On the one hand, partly thanks to the fact that this story was chosen as the titular story for the first posthumous collection of Kafka's short stories in 1931, it is generally well known (see Rojas, 2015). Kafka himself appeared to think of this collection "as his most important work" (Zeng, 2022, p. 62), and he returned to the scenario of the titular story at various moments, including in the related fragments "An Ancient Manuscript" (Ein Altes Blatt) and "The News of the Building of the Wall"[2]. On the other hand, less critical attention has been paid to "The Great Wall" than to many of Kafka's other stories or novels. In some ways the story seems to have been eclipsed by the parable that appears within it, "An Imperial Message" (Eine kaiserliche Botschaft) which Kafka published separately, in the Prague Jewish weekly *Selbstwehr* (September 24, 1919) and in his collection, *A Country Doctor* (*Ein Landarzt. Kleine Erzählungen* [Munich and Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1919]). And in other ways, discourse on the story seems to have been compartmentalized. Much of the easily available recent criticism of "The Great Wall" appears in studies dedicated primarily to investigating the relations between Kafka and China (see *inter alia*, Meng, 1986; Hsia, 1996; Wood, 1996; Goebel, 1997; Zeng, 2022).

Like any orientalist text, however, "The Great Wall" is not exclusively about China or about the past. It's rather more pointedly about Europe and Kafka's present. Specifically, as I will argue in this paper, it constitutes a complex reflection on the First World War in Prague and what Kafka's first English translators, freely adapting a phrase found in the story, called the "gruesomeness of the living present" (Kafka, 1998, 246).[3] Kafka wrote this story mere months after the death of the long-reigning Emperor Franz Josef, and questions about his legacy were pressing, especially for Prague's Jewish community facing the possibility of rising anti-Semitism should the Empire collapse. Commentators of Kafka tend to be wary of this kind of straightforwardly historicist reading. It was nobody other than Walter Benjamin, in his 1931 review of *The Great Wall of China*, who warned against interpretations of Kafka as simply referential: as resolved through reference to a real, symbolic, or religious world outside the text. Benjamin begins this review by quoting "An Imperial Message". While he doesn't offer to help the reader with his own take on the meaning of the parable, he does offer a word of caution: namely, that "a religious interpretation of Kafka's books" constitutes "a particular way of evading – or, one might almost say, of dismissing – Kafka's world" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 495). Benjamin goes on to argue that Kafka's world is not about any existent state of affairs, story, or historical condition. Rather, "Kafka's work is prophetic":

> The precisely registered oddities that abound in the life it deals with must be regarded by the reader as no more than the little signs, portents, and symptoms of the displacements that the writer feels

[1] I would like to thank Ian Michael Ellison, for his many generous suggestions for this article.

[2] "The News of the Building of the Wall" appears as a separate fragment in Kafka 1998. In Kafka 2012 it is appended, without a break, to the end of "At the Building of the Chinese Wall".

[3] This is Willa and Edwin Muir's rendering of a phrase that appears in Kafka's German original simply as "das grauenhafte Leben" (Kafka, 1995, 298). Although the Muir's translation is probably the most familiar to English readers, the text is often somewhat embellished. Except where noted, the translation of "The Great Wall" used below is by Joyce Crick (Kafka, 2012).

> approaching in every aspect of life without being able to adjust to the new situation. [… Kafka] is incapable of imagining any single event that would not be distorted by the mere act of describing it- though by "description" here we really mean "investigation". In other words, everything he describes makes statements about something other than itself (Benjamin, 1999, p. 496).

For Benjamin, any attempt to pin down the true content of Kafka's prose is doomed to failure because the reality with which Kafka deals is located in a prophetic future and hence – like the *clinamen* in the natural philosophy of Lucretius or like particles in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle – not immune to distorting effects of "the mere act of describing it". This then becomes the only valid content of Kafka's writing: "the distortion of existence" – it is a writing not about anything, but about the impossibility of the text ever corresponding to the reality it seeks to capture.

Over most of the last century, Benjamin's reading has framed theoretical discussions of Kafka, and of the "The Great Wall" in particular. We find his warning against referential, theological, psychoanalytic, or otherwise allegorical readings repeated in most of his major commentators. Theodor Adorno, for example, describes Kafka's work as "a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen: yet any effort to make this fact itself the key is bound to go astray by confounding the abstract thesis of Kafka's work, the obscurity of the existent, with its substance" (Adorno, 1981, p. 245). There is, consequently, a current of interpreting Kafka's writings which prohibits their explication on the basis of a fixed reality, against which, or in the light of which, all the peculiarities of his prose will come into focus. And in general, this is certainly a useful reminder. Nonetheless, in the case of "The Great Wall", this tendency to reject immediate material representation in the interpretation of Kafka's work fails to do it justice. I believe that "The Great Wall" only really makes sense when interpreted against or alongside war. While not sufficient as an explanation of the story – as a reduction of it to a symbolic level – nevertheless, as we will see, the context of the war provides an inextricable vibrating set of semiotic connections in which "The Great Wall" gains its power. In Kafka's hands, the Great Wall is the Great War.

The reading will proceed in three parts, largely following the chronological progress of Kafka's story itself. The first part outlines the ways in which Kafka represents the building of the wall as itself a nationalist act of war. The architectural imagination that goes into the production of the Great Wall of China is revealed as an origin or principal of a concept of war.

On this basis, the second part of the analysis shows how the representation of the Great Wall comes to offer a demonstration of the ways in which total or absolute war inhabits all areas of life, moral as well as political. Here I draw on Kafka's wartime writings in support of veterans to show that "The Great Wall" was a work invested in modeling the psychological effects of war, and that the "distortions" identified by Benjamin in Kafka's writings in this case correspond to Kafka's interest in the distortions of reality faced by veterans.

The third part of the inquiry will then focus on the ways in which language itself is represented in this story as a wall, and hence as something oriented towards the very heart of warfare. Here I will also turn to consider the vexed question of Kafka's own relationship to the war. Although this topic has recently received extensive critical scrutiny (see, *inter alia*, Engel and Robertson, 2012; Becher et al., 2012; Neumann, 2014; Ribó, 2020), Kafka's relationship to the

war remains enigmatic. Most readers tend to think of Kafka as remote from the war, as a pacifist or as uninterested in war, as exemplified in the famous diary entry: "Germany declared war on Russia.—Swimming school in the afternoon" (Kafka, 2022, p. 285). Along these lines, Klaus Wagenbach observed that the War "does not occupy more than fifty lines in [Kafka's] diaries and letters" (Wagenbach, 1964, p. 94; qtd. in RIBÓ, 2020, p. 21). And yet, despite or maybe because of his remoteness, Kafka was in various ways quite engaged in the Austrian cause. "The Great Wall" bears the traces of this enigmatic simultaneously remote and personal investment.

1. Imagining a National Architecture

Kafka burned the final version of "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer". The story he left behind in the third of the eight so-called Octavo notebooks that he used from 1916 to 1918, is a draft. Nevertheless, probably in large part thanks to Max Brod's editorial work, it is often mistaken for a finished piece. "Though apparently a fragment," wrote Edwin Muir, "'The Great Wall of China' is so perfect in itself that it may be read as a finished work" (Muir, 1933, p. 16). While this suggestion is rather doubtful, Muir's impression does point to an interesting quality in the story: namely that it is itself constructed of many architectural layers and not quite connected but related moments that imply a much larger unity. Like a number of Kafka's other stories – we might think especially of "The Penal Colony" – "The Great Wall" opens as a description of a process. In this case it's the supposedly historical process of the building of the wall, which took place in a piecemeal fashion:

> The Great Wall of China has been completed at its northernmost point. The construction was extended from the south-east and the south-west and brought together here. This system of building it in sections was also followed on a small scale within the two great armies of labourers, the eastern and western armies. This was done by forming groups of about twenty workers, who had the task of building a section of wall of about five hundred metres in length; a neighbouring group then built a wall of the same length to meet it. But then, after the union had been accomplished, construction was not in fact continued at one end of the thousand metres; rather, the groups of labourers were sent off to other regions entirely to build the wall. Of course in this way great gaps arose which were only filled slowly, bit by bit, many of them not until after it was proclaimed that the building of the wall had already been completed. Indeed, there are said to be gaps that have never been filled in at all; according to some they are much longer than the parts that have been built, though this may be an assertion belonging to one of the many legends that have arisen around the wall and which cannot be confirmed by any one individual, at least not with his own eyes, nor his own measurements, because the wall extends so far (Kafka, 2012, p. 101).

By the end of the first paragraph Kafka's narrator arrives at a view of the wall which emphasizes its inhuman scale: no single person can appreciate its scale or walk its entirety. The story appears to be heading towards a meditation and rewriting of the wall as a monumental work of something like postminimalist art – anticipating something like the work of Richard Long or Robert Morris's writing through the Nazca lines of Peru. And so, we seem to have moved definitively out of historical reference, to the realm of the very *longue durée*.

We are brought back, however, to a more pragmatic sense of this structure at the opening of the second paragraph, where Kafka's narrator addresses the question of why the wall was built piecemeal. The wall is a military object, designed "as was widely proclaimed and well known" as part of a larger war machine meant to separate the outsiders ("the tribes from the north") from the insiders. "How can a wall that is not continuous be a defence?" (Kafka, 2012, p. 101). In order to begin to appreciate how this function is served by the apparently illogical activity of building only small sections of the wall at a time, we need to start thinking at a larger temporal scale. For, as Kafka writes, "the wall was meant to be a defence for centuries, so the most careful construction, the use of building-lore from all times and all peoples, the constant feeling of personal responsibility on the part of the builders, formed the indispensable basis of their work" (Kafka, 2012, p. 101-102). And now the story reveals the extent to which every detail of this construction is also a deliberate project of social engineering, planned on a level vastly beyond that of the individual who participates in it. The work began at least fifty years before the first stone was laid with a revaluation of disciplines. In that period, "throughout the part of China that was to be surrounded by the wall, architecture and building skills, particularly masonry, had been declared the most important study, and everything else recognized only insofar as it had some bearing on it." (Kafka, 2012, p. 102) We get a vision of people being trained from the earliest age, dedicating their entire lives to the monolithic task of building the wall. The narrator himself is one of these specialized masons. He considers himself lucky to have come of age just when the building began, for many others before him had wasted their lives in waiting. The entire meaning of life for a generation of young people, the narrator explains, was tied up with the possibility of constructing this one object.

Kafka's description of the way in which masonry becomes a life-fulfilling dream for many young people initially seems odd. The image of a whole generation "[hanging] around uselessly" and "[going] to the dogs, in their masses," as contrasted to men so thoroughly identified with the wall "that they had grown to be part of the structure" (Kafka, 2012, p. 102) makes more sense, however, if we swap out for masonry something like militarism with its varying ranks. In Europe, at least since the days of the Napoleonic Wars, as we learn in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, young men grew up within an ideology that taught them, that real, historical and existential achievement, was military achievement. This is a point underlined critically by Virginia Woolf in many of her works, from *Jacob's Room* on. As she describes in her antiwar essay, *Three Guineas*, in Europe the educational system itself is part of a system of patriotic, militarist indoctrination, where value is determined primarily on the model of such military achievement. She quotes one soldier to this end: "I have had the happiest possible life, and have always been working for war, and have now got into the biggest in the prime of life for a soldier… Thank God, we are off in an hour. Such a magnificent regiment! Such men, such horses! Within ten days I hope Francis and I will be riding side by side straight at the Germans." (Woolf, 2001, p. 7). Here we might also recall the misery of Giovanni Drogo in Dino Buzzati's 1940 novel *Deserto dei tartari*, forced to wait his entire lives in a fortification not unlike the Great Wall of China, for a single glimpse of the tartars. Like Kafka, Buzzati both sympathizes with and satirizes the extent to which meaningful *Bildung* is tied up with a bellicose national architecture (see Buzzati, 1945).

There is a strong element of paranoia in "The Great Wall". This paranoia is both implicit in the wall itself, whose primary justification is to protect a space from invasion, and in the mode of thought that goes into producing the wall – a set of intentions lasting over multiple generations, spreading over an immense area, orchestrated by an invisible and apparently omniscient "*Führerschaft*" (Kafka, 1995, p. 292) or "Authority" (Kafka, 2012, p. 106). This Authority's location and constitution nobody knows, although like the viewer in the panopticon, it knows intimately the everyday domestic life of its subject, all of whom it inscribes within its grand plan. In this regard, "The Great Wall of China" has much in common with another unfinished story, written six months before Kafka's death, that initially appeared in the same collection, "The Burrow" (Der Bau). The titles of both these stories, which are motivated by paranoid processes of thought, are in at least one sense badly translated into English. In German, the title of the first isolates not the object so much as the construction: "Beim Bau"; the second text recalls the same word, "Der Bau". Wall and burrow are presented as part of the same complex – one that may also play on the name of Kafka's fiancée: Felice Bauer. (In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka later compared his lingering affection for Bauer to the feeling an "unsuccessful general has for the city he could not take" [Kafka, 2016, p. 247]). Among other things, what the comparison highlights is the extent to which the object itself is less important than the construction by which it comes to inhabit – almost parasitically – the mental space of its creators.

The next part of "The Great Wall" continues the justification of the initially illogical piecemeal construction. Why did they only build in sections of five hundred metres? Because the building of any one such section would wear out the group-leaders. Being sent far away to another section, however,

> they would see finished sections of the wall soaring up, would pass the quarters of the higher-ranking leaders, who decorated them with honours, hear the cheers of fresh armies of labourers pouring from the depths of the provinces, see forests laid low, destined to be scaffolding for the wall, see mountains broken into stones for the wall; at the holy places they would listen to the hymns of the pious pleading for its completion (Kafka, 2012, p. 103).

This assuages their impatience and gives them back their sense of meaning:

> every fellow countryman was a brother for whom they were building a defensive wall, and who thanked them all his life long with everything he had and was. Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a round-dance of the people, blood, no longer imprisoned in the narrow confines of the body's veins, but circulating sweetly and still returning through the infinite expanse of China (Kafka, 2012, p. 103).

If in the opening paragraph our understanding of the Great Wall of China is as a barrier, to keep out the "tribes from the north", here a new affordance is layered on top of this one. We begin to think about the wall as serving also a set of functions which are more psychological than physical. Among these perhaps the most important is a consolidatory nationalizing function: giving a singular national identity to the diversity of individual peoples whose land is now to be bounded by the wall. As the narrator tells us over the course of the next few pages,

he himself hails "from the south-east of China" where "no northern tribe can threaten us" and where in fact, nothing but legends are known of the northerners because "the country is too vast, and will not let them reach us; they will lose their way in the empty air." (Kafka, 2012, p. 106). The wall, however, remains important. According to the narrator, this is because its true *raison d'être* does not come from the outside. Rather, the wall functions somewhat in the nationalizing manner of the railway, newspaper, or novel in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. It unifies radically disjunct spaces through its disparate reference to one project and temporality (see Anderson,1983). It consolidates a common identity within an empire that is "so vast" "no legend can do justice to its vastness, the heavens can scarcely span it." (Kafka, 2012, p. 107).

2. The War of Nerves

Writing from the collapsing Austro-Hungarian empire in 1917, Kafka was certainly aware of the ways in wars are fought both, as the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz pointed out, in the physical realm as well as in the moral or psychological realm. War in this sense, constituted not only, as Clausewitz's famous saying has it "the continuation of policy with other means" (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 87), but also a tendency towards something like a "total" or even totalitarian society, where the entirety of a nation's endeavor goes towards the war effort, and where increasingly over the first decades of the 20th century, the stakes of not winning began to seem equally total and existential. As Paul Saint-Amour's study of modernist fiction, *Tense Future* describes, much innovative writing of the time was shaped by an anxiety about total war. We see this most clearly, perhaps, in the works of Virginia Woolf as well as in the encyclopedic fiction of James Joyce. One of Saint-Amour's arguments is broadly against the theory of shellshock developed by Sigmund Freud in his 1920 work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. According to Freud, anxiety about the future is prophylactic, presenting a psychic defense for soldiers. Shellshock results from a lack of this prophylactic anxiety: the suddenness of modern warfare forces soldiers to experience the anxiety and trauma after the event rather than before (see Freud, 1922). According to Saint-Amour, however, anxiety, far from inuring victims against shock, was itself a tactical resource. The idea of a war that would involve all aspects of national life was developed as an instrument of war, a way to "ensure a citizenry's political docility… by manipulating the expectation of violence" (Saint-Amour, 2015, p. 16).

Saint-Amour does not refer directly to Kafka at any point in his book. Nonetheless, "The Great Wall" – especially in its overlaps with a text like "The Burrow" – makes sense as a work where Kafka's so-called prophetic writing hits upon total war, here in the guise of a Great Wall that not only keeps out the hypothetical enemy, but unifies the insider around a monumental military idea that is always in the background.

It is a little-known fact that Kafka himself wrote about shellshock victims (*Kriegszitterer*) in four argumentative pieces written roughly contemporaneously with "The Great Wall" in late 1916 and early 1917. The first of these, "A Major War Relief Plan Demands Realization:

Establishing a Psychiatric Hospital in German Bohemia" was ghost-written for his employer Eugen Pfohl, and published in the *Rumburger Zeitung* on October 8, 1916. The second was a call for financial support for the German Society for the Establishment and Maintenance of a Public Veterans' Psychiatric Hospital for German Bohemia in Prague, and it came out in November. The latter two, from December 1916 and May 1917, were propagandistic appeals for support for disabled veterans. Kafka opens the first piece narratively – as if writing one of his disconcerting stories about not-quite human presences in the urban everyday:

> Soon after the outbreak of war, a strange apparition, arousing fear and pity, appeared in the streets of our cities. He was a soldier returned from the front. He could move only on crutches or had to be pushed along in a wheelchair. His body shook without cease, as if he were overcome by a mighty chill, or he was standing stock-still in the middle of the tranquil street, in the thrall of his experiences at the front. We see others, too, men who could move ahead only by taking jerky steps; poor, pale, and gaunt, they leaped as though a merciless hand held them by the neck, tossing them back and forth in their tortured movements.
>
> People gazed at them with compassion but more or less thoughtlessly, especially as the number of such apparitions increased and became almost a part of life on the street. But there was no one to provide the necessary explanation and to say something like the following:
>
> What we are seeing here are neuroses, most of them triggered by trauma but other forms as well. No matter how many of these trembling, jerking men we see in the streets, their actual numbers are much larger. Furthermore, this is merely one kind of nervous illness, not even the most serious kind, simply the most conspicuous (Kafka, 2009, p. 336-37).

Striking in this context is the fact that Kafka does not isolate war trauma as the only cause of the witnessed neuroses. Rather, as he contends in the second piece, the psychological effects of war may be merely exacerbated versions of effects already experienced in the increasingly machinic workplace:

> The World War, in which all human misery is concentrated, is also a war of nerves, more so than any previous war. And in this war of nerves, all too many suffer defeat. Just as the intensive operation of machinery during the last few decades' peacetime jeopardized, far more than ever before, the nervous systems of those so employed, giving rise to nervous disturbances and disorders, the enormous increase in the mechanical aspect of contemporary warfare has caused the most serious risks and suffering for the nerves of our fighting men. […] The nervous men who shake and jerk in the streets of our cities are only relatively innocuous emissaries from the enormous horde of sufferers (Kafka, 2009, p. 339-40).

As the editors of Kafka's *Office Writings* helpfully gloss, Kafka's understanding here "squarely contest[s]" the "concept of a discontinuity, even contradiction, between war and peace implied in [Freud's] explanation" of war neuroses. "Replacing the opposition between 'war' and 'peace' by the opposition between 'machine' and 'human nerves,'" they write, "Kafka highlights the strategic center of both documents, which asserts the continuity of a battle that began well before the war and that, more importantly, would continue after its end" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 343). This is important partly because, of course, Kafka was writing as a representative of an

insurance association for workers. His concern, in these writings, is ensuring the efficiency of welfare. He sees welfare and warfare as mutually entailed. Fighting the war involves looking after the workers as much as it involves looking after the soldiers. Equally, in "The Great Wall," welfare and warfare come together in something like "wallfare," when Kafka describes the importance of maintaining the psychological health of the "worn out" group-leaders. The story is acutely aware of the ways in which war begins long before any kind of conflict (or construction of the wall), and affects spaces and people far away from the front. It is about the "hinterland" (a word used in both the story and the office writings): a hinterland which is both physical and psychological: always remote, yet never immune.

Kafka's war is fought not only on the battlefield but in everyday life, in psychology, in writing, and on the streets of cities like Prague, far away from the front. This theme emerges also in Kafka's fragmentary follow-up to "The Great Wall" titled "An Ancient Manuscript". This fragmentary sequel is told from the perspective of a cobbler living on the main square of the imperial capital, across from the imperial castle. The fragment begins with cobbler's observation that: "It is as if the defence of our country has been much neglected" (Kafka, 2012, p. 19). The cobbler then tells how "nomads from the North," somewhat like the "hordes" of veterans, have been increasingly filling the capital, camping under the open sky, "sharpening their swords, honing their arrows, exercising on horseback" (Kafka, 2012, p. 19). The nomads steal whatever they can. In order to support them, the butcher has been giving them meat – for they are obsessed with meat. "Their horses are meat-eaters too; a rider will often lie down next to his horse, and the two of them will eat from the same piece of meat, one from each end." (Kafka, 2012, p. 20). The fragment ends with a melancholy reflection:

> The Imperial Palace has attracted the nomads here, but doesn't know how to drive them away again. The gate is kept locked; the guards, who in the old days always marched ceremonially in and out, stay behind barred windows. The salvation of our country has been entrusted to us, craftsmen and traders; but we are not up to such a task; and we have never boasted that we were capable of it, either (Kafka, 2012, p. 20).

The final sentence of the story re-emphasizes the theme of misunderstanding ("Ein Mißverständnis" [Kafka, 1995, 131]): "It is a misunderstanding; and it will be our ruin' (Kafka, 2012, p. 20).

The editors of Kafka's *Office Writings* connect his argumentative pieces with "An Ancient Manuscript" (which they translate as "A Page from an Old Document") and "The Great Wall." In both types of writing, they explain, "Kafka's strategy is to reconceive the core concepts of 'fatherland,' 'state,' 'duty,' 'sacrifice,' and 'life'" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 353). That is, Kafka's "strategy" (itself a military term) is to work on language, to change the meanings of words. "These key words," the editors continue,

> allow us to trace a network of significant correspondences between, on the one hand, Kafka's literary scenario of national defense in his two stories "Building the Great Wall of China" and "A Page from an Old Document" and, on the other hand, Werner Sombart's influential 1915 war pamphlet *Händler und Helden* (Traders and Heroes) (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 353).

Sombart's book aimed to "give meaning to industrialized mass killing on World War I battlefronts" by contrasting the "German 'type' of the 'hero; with the English 'type' of the 'trader.'" Where the hero is self-sacrificing, believing in the organic idea of the state as a "superindividual entity, to which individuals belong as its parts," the trader "is concerned with his rights" and conceives the state as "the result of a contractual agreement between individuals" – a kind of "mutual insurance institute" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 353). Kafka's "Chinese scenario," claim the editors – "which begins with a heroic vision of national defense and ends with a conquered fatherland of helpless traders and merchants" – works to contest Sombart's Germanic superindividual view of the nation. "Kafka," they explain, "subsumes the individual under the state and even praises military success, not in the name of collective death, but in the name of individual life" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 354). Thus, Kafka's work for veterans dovetails with the scenario presented in "The Great Wall": both the essayistic writing and the fiction help shift necropolitical perspectives on the war to biopolitical perspectives.

3. Drawing Lines Around Language

In the preceding sections I outlined some of the ways in which Kafka's story can be read as involved in the war. In this final section I'd like to evaluate Kafka's personal interest in the conflict. While I agree with the editors of Kafka's *Office Writings* that his essays in support of veterans can be read alongside the "Chinese scenario" as proposing a third approach to wartime nationalism – neither Germanic nor English – I do not agree with the conclusion (to which they arrive at the end of their commentary), that "[a]part from Kafka's official responsibility in the field of veterans' welfare, it is his remarkable pacifism—something more than unexamined antimilitarism—that connects these two articles to his campaign for a psychiatric hospital in German Bohemia" (Corngold et al., 2009, p. 354). Specifically, I propose that this assumption of Kafka's pacifism and antimilitarism (which itself reflects a widely held belief) needs to be tempered both by a clearer biographical understanding of Kafka's approach to the war, and by a more detailed reading of a specific theme of language in the two stories.

In terms of Kafka's own patriotic investments during the First World War, the description "remarkable pacifism" is inaccurate, as Reiner Stach's biography and other recent studies of Kafka and the First World War in Prague have shown (see the essays collected in Engel and Robinson, 2012; Becher et al., 2012, and Nekuka, 2016). Although Kafka certainly never fought on the front, he was insistent and quite sincere that he wanted to enlist. "His endeavors to serve in the military were well thought out, purposeful, and spirited, and they were repeated for years on end" (Stach, 2013, p. 61). To his delight, he even passed the medical examination for conscription, but was eventually held back by a petition for exemption filed by the Workers' Accident Insurance company, on the grounds of his indispensability (see Stach, 2013, p. 54). Reiner Stach concludes that he "was a moderate patriot" and "feared a military defeat of Austria" (Stach, 2013, p. 79). Mark Cornwall has also demonstrated that a close consideration of Kafka's biography shows "a certain conventional allegiance to the Habsburg monarchy's colossal struggle" period between

1914 and 1918 (Cornwall, 2018, p. 169). Despite his distance from the field of battle, Kafka was invested in the war in a number of different ways. "The Great Wall" needs also to be read as a record of this complex, distanced, yet personal and strategic engagement. This engagement is neither that of the hero who dies for the fatherland, nor that of the trader, but rather that of the writer or emissary. As a writer, Kafka was, as Corngold, Greenberg and Wagner correctly suggest, "strategically" invested in manipulating the meanings of words like "fatherland" and in scoping out the ways that identity attaches to a national language; it is as an *avant-garde* writer that he was on the conceptual battlements.

The theme of language emerges in "The Great Wall" about three pages into the story, when Kafka's narrator surprises us with another, rather bizarre possible reading of the wall's function – namely as a basis for a new Tower of Babel. As the narrator tells us, "in the early days of building a scholar wrote a book" in which he maintained "that only the Great Wall would for the first time in human history create a secure foundation for the Tower of Babel. So, first the Wall and then the Tower" (Kafka, 2012, p. 104). Kafka's mention of Babel is an invitation to read the wall as also a structure or container for language itself. When we approach the story in this way, we notice that one word is significantly missing from Kafka's text (and perhaps it's missing precisely because Kafka wants to keep it out). It's a word that is evoked by the first syllable of Babel. This is the German word for Barbarian, "Barbar." "Barbar" or "barbarian" comes from the Greek *Barbaros* and has an alleged root in the gibberish that the Greeks imagined the non-Greek as speaking, i.e. "Bar… bar… bar… bar…" When one builds a wall to keep out the barbarians, therefore, what one is keeping out is by definition the threat of a language that is not understood. Conversely one is producing inside the wall a nation on the basis of mutual intelligibility.

Babel is the archetypal figure for both a globally united humanity reaching the heavens and for the separation of languages. By evoking the possibility of building a new tower of Babel on the foundation of the Great Wall, Kafka brings into his story something like a dream of a new world language. But with it, this suggestion ushers in another interesting shift. Where at the beginning the wall might represent a barrier, on the inside of which all is mutually intelligible, as the story progresses, the emphasis is increasingly on the impossibility of getting one's meaning across. This climaxes in the aforementioned parable often extracted under the title "An Imperial Message" or "A Message from the Emperor":

> The Emperor—so it is said—has sent to you, the solitary, the miserable subject, the infinitesimal shadow who fled the imperial sun to far and furthest parts, to you and none other, the Emperor has from his deathbed sent a message. […] The messenger has set off at once; […] But the crowd is so vast, their dwellings never come to an end. If open country stretched out before him, how he would fly, and soon, no doubt, you would hear the commanding sound of his fists beating upon your door. But instead, how uselessly he labours; he is still forcing his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; he will never get through them; and if he managed that, there would be nothing gained; he would have to fight his way down the stairs; and if he managed that, there would be nothing gained; the courtyards would have to be crossed, and after the courtyards, the second, outer palace; and again more stairs and more courtyards, and again a palace; and so on through the millennia; and if at last he emerged, stumbling, through the outermost gates—but that can

> never, never happen—the imperial city still lies before him, the centre of the world, piled high with its own refuse. No one will get through here— and certainly not with a message from the dead.— You, though, will sit at your window and conjure it up for yourself in your dreams, as evening falls (Kafka, 2012, p. 28).

The imperial message cannot be delivered. This is not because of its unintelligibility, but rather because of the apparently vast and homogenous, fractal, nature of the landscape that it has to traverse. Contained inside a wall, the landscape is so dense with its own refuse or sediment, the architecture so tight and self-similar, so wall-like that no movement is possible. How can we ever communicate, Kafka seems to be asking, paradoxically, if we all speak the same language, if all the walls have been broken down except the one great wall that unites us?

At first sight, these references to the difficulty of communication in Kafka's story might seem to steer us away from any strict reading of "The Great Wall" as a representation of war. Yet it would be a mistake to separate this theme of a language barrier or miscommunication from what I understand as the larger referent of the story. For language itself is implicated in war, as war's equivalent, or as the thing that stands in for war in this story. This surfaces towards the end of the story when the narrator is describing the isolation of his hometown. "Our people," he begins, "are but little affected by revolutions in the state or contemporary wars":

> I recall an incident in my youth. A revolt had broken out in a neighboring, but yet quite distant, province. What caused it I can no longer remember, nor is it of any importance now; occasions for revolt can be found there any day, the people are an excitable people. Well, one day a leaflet published by the rebels was brought to my father's house by a beggar who had crossed that province. It happened to be a feast day, our rooms were filled with guests, the priest sat in the center and studied the sheet. Suddenly everybody started to laugh, in the confusion the sheet was torn, the beggar, who however had already received abundant alms, was driven out of the room with blows, the guests dispersed to enjoy the beautiful day. Why? The dialect of this neighboring province differs in some essential respects from ours, and this difference occurs also in certain turns of the written word, which for us have an archaic character. Hardly had the priest read two pages before we had come to our decision. Ancient history told long ago, old sorrows long since healed. And though – so it seems to me in recollection – the gruesomeness of the living present was irrefutably conveyed by the beggar's words, we laughed and shook our heads and refused to listen any longer (Kafka, 1998, p. 246).[4]

Early in this essay, I quoted Benjamin's suggestion that at the heart of Kafka's work is a prophetic awareness of the "distortion" of the new, between the writer and the time described. Here we can glimpse again how, in "The Great Wall" the mechanism of prophetic distortion that Benjamin identified as characteristic or definitive of Kafka's method fuses with his reflections on the nature of war and the "gruesomeness of the living present." The cause of the war is read and misinterpreted through the dialect that mediates it – plotting the violence of one kind of conflict onto a linguistic violence. In a passage of *The Translation Zone* that sheds light on the art of this story, Emily Apter writes:

[4] This is the Willa and Edwin Muir translation. This paragraph appears to be missing from the Crick translation of the story.

> Mistranslation is a concrete particular of the art of war, crucial to strategy and tactics, part and parcel of the way in which images of bodies are read, and constitutive of matériel—in its extended sense as the hard- and software of intelligence. It is also the name of diplomatic breakdown and paranoid misreading. Drawing on Carl von Clausewitz's ever-serviceable dictum "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means," I would maintain that war is the continuation of extreme mistranslation or disagreement by other means. War is, in other words, a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak (Apter, 2009, p. 15-16).

The story's treatment of the impossibility of communication is thus conceptually bound up in various ways with "contemporary wars" and their effects on "our people."

Language, untranslatability, and the question of dialect was also central to the war within Austria-Hungary, and specifically to Kafka's experience of the Great War. As Cornwall describes in his chapter on the First World War in *Kafka in Context*, the dominant issue within the region of Bohemia where Kafka spent his war years was one of national unity or disunity, characterized by debates over language politics. The war, he writes, "constantly impinged on and disrupted daily routines and communications" including with censorship and disruptions to the postal service – which meant that Kafka's messages to Felice Bauer often went, like the imperial message, undelivered (Cornwall, 2018, p. 168). More generally, political loyalties tended to split on linguistic lines. Czech speakers, as Jaroslav Hašek brilliantly depicts in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, tended to see the war opportunistically, as a possibility of forwarding an anti-German position. *Švejk* is full of examples of tactical mistranslation (see Hašek, 1974). On the other hand, first-language German speakers (to which category Prague's bourgeois Jewish population largely belonged), tended to perceive the war as an opportunity to reaffirm German hegemony. So, for example, Cornwall describes how,

> Buoyed up by the military successes of spring 1915, the German Bohemian leaders set out a 'German course', to finally implement their dream since 1882 of territorially dividing Bohemia along national lines and ensuring that German would always overrule Czech there as the state language. This gradually gained the support of the Austrian government (Cornwall, 2018, p. 170).

Following Deleuze and Guattari's influential reading of Kafka's minor language as destabilizing the efficient, vehicular language of Prussian bureaucratese imposed on Bohemia by freighting it with baggage from Yiddish or colloquial Czech, we tend to associate the author with a subversive language politics (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). Yet actually Kafka's German is hardly inflected by any local idiom from Prague or a broader Czech context; it is rather a classic high German. Kafka's loyalties too, as Cornwall demonstrates, were with the German-Bohemian war effort, which he supported both financially and in his office writings. (The call for the establishment of a public veteran's psychiatric hospital was specifically for a "German" society for "German Bohemia.") As happened, however, from spring 1917 on (when "The Great Wall" was written), Czech increasingly became a cause *célèbre* of nationalist elements in Bohemia. After the war, street names were changed from German to Czech. One of the first significant nationalizing political moves made by T. G. Masaryk's new state of Czechoslovakia was to establish a new mode of censusing identity: one's identity followed one's mother tongue – and in order to ensure

a Czechoslovak majority, the choice was either Czechoslovak (a nonexistent hybrid of two different languages – Czech and Slovakian) or German, not, as had been possible previously, both. In other words, the period when Kafka was writing was a period when the two languages that surrounded him in everyday life were at war with each other, or on the cusp of making new alliances, when an Austrian imperial identity was breaking along linguistic lines. Kafka would not have been unaware that this war, in some ways, is built into the languages themselves. The Czech word for German – the language in which Kafka wrote his story – is "*němčina*." Like the word Barbarian, this word emerges from assumptions about how the Other speaks or does not speak. Its etymology is the word "*němý*," meaning mute. To early Czech speakers, Germans, *němci*, were those who are mute.

Here it is helpful to turn back to "An Ancient Manuscript" and to the scene where the nomads from the north have invaded the imperial capital and inhabit it like a kind of primitive horde. Kafka's narrator describes these nomads and the impossibility of communicating with them. "It is impossible to talk with the nomads," explains the cobbler:

> They do not know our language; indeed, they scarcely have one of their own. Among themselves they communicate rather like jackdaws. One hears this jackdaw's cry constantly. Their incomprehension of our way of life, our institutions, is on a par with their indifference to them. Consequently they respond to any kind of sign language by rejecting it. You can dislocate your jaw and wrench your hands from your wrists, but they still won't have understood you and they never will understand you (Kafka, 2012, p. 19).

Scholars are fond of pointing out that "*kavka*" (pronounced kafka), in Czech, is a jackdaw. The Kafka family identified with this icon. Kafka's name appears as "Civilian Kavka" on his recruitment sheet (Stach, 2013, p. 61). Herman Kafka, who also went by the Czech name Heřman Kafka, and who was a trader on the Old Town Square, had a jackdaw above his shop. He allegedly escaped victimization in antisemitic wartime riots only on account of his being perceived as a Czech. So, in some sense, here, the speech of the nomads, or the barbarians, described as "communicating with rather like jackdaws" is again a reflection of the language of Kafka himself and the risk of ruin or muteness implied in linguistic misunderstanding. "An Ancient Manuscript," Marek Nekula rightly notes in *Franz Kafka and His Prague Contexts*, is – like the similar story "Jackals and Arabs" – also about "the 'new' linguistic antisemitism" (Nekula, 2016, p. 125).

"The Great Wall" and "An Ancient Manuscript" are not simply coded treatments of the worsening relations between Germans, Czechs, and Jews during the war. Nonetheless, by way of concluding, I'd like to underline the suggestion that the Kafka's fiction during this period may have been involved not only with articulating a particular interpretation of the war as bound up with welfare, but to have been also itself embattled in its the formulation of an anxiety about the linguistic future of the city that he lived in. "Kafka," Stach reminds us, "took the war *personally*, in the strictest sense of the word" (Stach, 2013, p. 80). This involved also thinking about German and Czech as themselves languages that created identities, which in turn, were undergoing a kind of divorce. In his later letters to Milena Jesenská – his first translator – he touches on this idea at various moments. While he praises her translation of "The Stoker" (Der Heizer), he

expresses a sense that in bringing her Czech version of his text so close to his German version, as a translator, she is enacting some form of betrayal of the Czech language. As Michelle Woods observes: "He closes his first comment on her fidelity with a query: 'German and Czech so close to each other?' / "So nahe deutsch und tschechisch?", suggesting both the impossibility of this proximity and also the possibilities for it" (Woods, 2014, p. 18).

Kafka was of course not, in any simple sense, a linguistic nationalist for German in Prague. But he evidently did see in his use of language an engagement with the war that was happening around him – a war from which he was not, consequently, immune or distanced. Following Benjamin, it's easy to read the parable of "The Imperial Message" as being about Kafka's sense of his own isolation as a writer, unable to represent a present reality without distortion, deep in the hinterlands of Austria Hungary. His recognition has not yet arrived. His is a minor language position, doomed to be ignored. But as my interpretation of "The Great Wall" in this article suggests, it may be more accurate to read the figure of Kafka in the story not as the person waiting by the window, dreaming the parable to himself, but also as the emperor – writing a missive from a collapsing imperial center, on behalf of the imperial forces, on behalf of a language which will no longer have currency in the streets. Or – better – as also the messenger, the emissary, or postman, hoping to get the letter from the emperor through the mass of misunderstandings and obstructions, linguistic, psychological, as well as material, that have now come to constitute the state. Or – perhaps best of all – as himself also one of the nameless courtiers and servants, blocking the corridors, both a supporter and an impediment, contributing to the impossibility of any kind of transcendent message or meaning ever finding its destination. In one of his pieces calling for aid for disabled veterans, Kafka wrote:

> We must not keep the idea of the state and the totality of its citizens in separate categories. The war has clearly shown that all of us are the state, that none of us stands outside the concept of the state, that the state's success is success for each one of us, and that a blow against the state is felt by each of us with equal force (Kafka, 2009, p. 347).

Switching out the word war for wall, these sentences could easily be read as a description of Kafka's "The Great Wall." In relation to the Great Wall everyone is also part of one project; it is the thing that unites and divides, that bounds and marks limits, that prevents progress, and that ultimately turns into our ruin.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

REFERENCES

ADORNO, Theodor. "Notes on Kafka". *In*: **Prisms**. trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981, p. 243-270.

ANDERSON, Benedict. **Imagined Communities**: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso, 1983.

APTER, Emily. **The Translation Zone**: A New Comparative Literature. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

BECHER, Peter; HÖHNE, Steffen; NEKULA, Marek. (eds.) **Kafka und Prag**: Literatur-, kultur-, sozial- und sprachhistorische Kontexte. Cologne: Böhlau, 2012.

BENJAMIN, Walter. Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer trans. Rodney Livingstone. *In*: **Walter Benjamin**: Selected writings part II, vol 2, 1931-1934. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 494-500.

BUZZATI, Dino. **Il Deserto dei tartari**. Milan: A. Mondadori: 1945.

CLAUSEWITZ, Carl von. **On War**. trans. Michael Howard. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.

CORNGOLD, Stanley, GREENBERG, Jack; WAGNER, Benno. Commentary. In: **Kafka**, 2009.

CORNWALL, Mark. "The First World War". *In*: **Franz Kafka in Context**. Ed. Carolin Duttlinger. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. **Kafka**: Toward a Minor Literature. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

ENGEL, Manfred; ROBERTSON, Ritchie. (eds.). **Kafka, Prag und der Erste Weltkrieg / Kafka, Prague and the First World War**. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012.

FREUD, Sigmund. **Beyond the Pleasure Principle**. Trans. C.J.M. Hubback. London: Hogarth Press, 1922.

GOEBEL, Rolf J. **Constructing China**: Kafka's Orientalist Discourse. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997.

HAŠEK, Jaroslav. **The good soldier Švejk and his fortunes in the World War**. Trans. Cecil Parrott. New York: Crowell, 1974.

HSIA, Adrian. ed. **Kafka and China**. Bern; New York: P. Lang, 1996.

KAFKA, Franz. **Sämtliche Erzählungen**. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995.

KAFKA, Franz. **The Complete stories**. New York: Schocken, 1998.

KAFKA, Franz. **The Office Writings**, ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner; trans. Eric Patton with Ruth Hein. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009.

KAFKA, Franz. **A Hunger Artist and Other Stories.** Trans. Joyce Crick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

KAFKA, Franz. **Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors.** Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York, Schocken, 2016.

KAFKA, Franz. **The Diaries.** Trans. Ross Benjamin. New York: Schocken, 2022.

MENG, Weiyan. **Kafka und China**. München: Iudicum-Verlag, 1986.

MUIR, Edwin. Introduction to The Great Wall of China. *In*: **Franz Kafka**: Description of a Struggle and The Great Wall Of China. London: Secker and Warburg, 1933, p. 9-16.

NEKULA, Marek. **Franz Kafka and His Prague Contexts**. Prague: Karolinum, 2016.

NEUMANN, Bernd. **Franz Kafka und der Große Krieg. Eine kulturhistorische Chronik seines Schreibens**. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2014.

RIBÓ, Ignasi. "At the farthest pole from man": Kafka's posthuman outlook on war". **Journal of Modern Literature**, 44.1, Fall 2020, p. 20-35.

ROJAS, Carlos. Writing on the wall: Benjamin, Kafka, Borges, and the Chinese imaginary. **452°F.** #13 (2015), p. 71-81.

SAINT-AMOUR, Paul. **Tense Future**: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

STACH, Reiner. **Kafka**: The Years of Insight. Trans. Shelley Frisch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

WAGENBACH, KLAUS. **Franz Kafka**. Rowohlt Verlag, 1964.

WOOD, Michael. Kafka's China and the Parable of Parables, **Philosophy and Literature**, Volume 20, Issue 2, 1996, p. 325-337.

WOODS, Michelle. **Kafka translated**: How Translators Have Shaped Our Reading of Kafka. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

WOOLF, Virginia. **Three Guineas**. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001.

ZENG, Yanbing. **Franz Kafka and Chinese Culture Trans**. Yuan Li. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.