

J A S O N S . R I D L E R

*War in the Precious Graveyard:
Death through the Eyes of Guy Sajer*

I want to travel in Europe, Alyosha, I shall set off from here. And yet I know that I am only going to a graveyard, but it is a precious graveyard, that's what it is! Precious are the dead that lie there, every stone over them speaks of such burning life in the past, of passionate faith in their work, their truth, their struggles and their science, that I know I shall fall on the ground and kiss those stones and weep over them; though I'm convinced in my heart that its long been nothing but a graveyard.

—Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

DOSTOYEVSKY'S COMMENTS were over a half-century old when Hitler unleashed the Second World War on September 1st, 1939. But this image of Europe as a sacred and yet dead place could just as easily describe the rending of civilization by the force of total war that consumed an estimated forty million of lives on the Eastern Front. From that titanic struggle, Guy Sajer produced *The Forgotten Soldier*, a narrative account of his war experience fighting with the Germans against the Soviets.

Sajer's work has sparked controversy over the accuracy and verity of his recollections since first being published in serial form in France during the 1950s. Military historians have taken him to task over the legitimacy of his battle

descriptions and the accuracy of his troop locations, going so far as to claim that *The Forgotten Soldier* is more of a *roman clef* than an autobiography. Such arguments obfuscate the true and enduring value of *The Forgotten Soldier* as a profoundly human document of war experience.

Death dominates Sajer's experience. As a survivor of Germany's defeat, he is torn between his revulsion for the dead that permeated the war and the *noblesse oblige* of a soldier to die for his cause. He detests the thought of becoming the dead, but guilt from survival makes him idealize the act of dying. Sajer's compromise is to speak for the dead by writing his war experiences, giving his own memories of fallen comrades a sacred place even in defeat. To do this, Sajer distinguishes between good and bad death, concluding that, even in this work of remembrance, he must remove himself from memory because, as a survivor in defeat, he does not belong alongside his fallen comrades

The Physical Presence of the Dead

In civilized society, human beings are not constantly reminded of their fragile mortality. The presence of death is kept out of the day-to-day operations of most human activities. Where death remains a constant, such as in cemeteries, hospitals and homes for the elderly, the general populace only go intermittently. The physical reality of death, that is, a dead human body, is kept hidden from the daily running of human affairs. Even within their sacred areas outside the normal sphere of human activities, there is a normalcy we associate with the dead. We view them as still and silent versions of their former living selves, their last living moments are frozen in the human eye. This is how they are laid to rest, with physical integrity intact for their final journey.

But in war, the dead confront the living every day. They are a product of war that in turn shape and define its landscape and inhabitants. Since the industrial revolution, war technology has provided the capability for nation states to litter battlefields with increasing amounts of human remains. In the wake of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, corpses litter both the battleground and occupied territories of the Eastern Front.¹ This is the landscape Sajer inhabits for three years. Central to his experience is the constant presence of death:

Clouds of smoke were rising all along the battered front. We felt as if we could smell the presence of death—and by that I don't mean the process of decomposition, but the smell that emanates from death when its proportions have reached a certain magnitude. Anyone who has been on a battlefield knows what I mean.²

Travelling among the dead, Sajer is repulsed by their state, a constant reminder of the end of things. Their presence deepens his commitment to survival in the war when all other reason had vanished.

Perversions of Normalcy

It is normal to expect corpses as products of battle, strewn where they fell. But the more uncomfortable reality is that the dead are permanent fixtures throughout the landscape of war, encroaching upon the living when battle has ended. Soldiers must carry on acts of normalcy despite the grotesque surrounding of human debris. After the initial fighting in Belgorod, Sajer and comrades must work to clear human remains before the call of the next offensive. We witness differing views of the dead from youths and the old soldier referred to as “the veteran.”

Our first job was to get rid of some thirty Bolshevik corpses scattered through the rubble. We dumped them into a small garden, which must once have been cultivated. The day was hot and heavy. A greasy sun threw sharp shadows, and made squint in the harsh light, which emphasized every hollow in our exhausted faces. The same light poured down onto the faces of the dead Russians, whose fixed eyes were opened inordinately wide. Looking at them, and thinking about us all, made my stomach turn over.

“Isn’t it funny,” the Sudeten remarked calmly, “how quickly a fellow’s beard grows when he’s dead? Look at this one.” He turned over a body with his foot. The man’s tunic was torn by seven or eight bloody holes. “He probably shaved yesterday, just before he was killed. And look at him now. He’s got a beard on him that would have taken a week otherwise.”

“See this one,” laughed another fellow, who was clearing out a building which had been hit by a heavy mortar shell. He was dragging a Russian soldier whose head had been blown off.

“You’d do better to go and shave yourself, if you want anyone to recognize you when it’s your turn tomorrow. You give me pain with your idiotic remarks. Anyone would think that’s the first stiff you’ve ever seen.” The veteran sat down on a heap of rubble, and opened his mess tin.³

The reaction to the dead is not universal. To each soldier they produce feelings of revulsion, curiosity, humour and indifference. The veteran’s indifference to the presence of the dead does not impede him from eating. Sajer and his comrade

Hals, by comparison, can only look at the dead with fear. Feeling sick after a battle, Hals cannot eat or drink: “‘I just feel like vomiting, I’m just so tired—and those fellows over there don’t help either.’ He nodded at the thirty putrefying corpses in the little garden.”⁴

This disgust toward the dead follows him into their natural habitat in war: the battlefield. They lie as a constant reminder of a soldier’s fate. Following this meal the men advance through a “frightful slaughtering ground of Hitlerjugend, mixed into the dirt of the bombardment of the day before.” “Each step made us realize with fresh horror what could become of our miserable flesh.” Sajer realizes the distinct relationship between himself and the dead in whose footsteps he is now marching. On this battleground, Hals’ earlier revulsion becomes anger. He too is reminded of the fate that awaits them, wishing someone had removed such evidence. “‘Somebody should have buried all this mincemeat so we wouldn’t have to look,’ Hals grumbled. Everyone laughed, as if he had just said something funny.”⁵

Black humour distances soldiers from their natural horror of the dead, allowing for a pragmatic view of corpses, a gradual process required by the demands of living in wartime. Initially, Sajer is shocked by the Russian’s utilitarian use of the dead. While in Poland he and Hals observe a trainload of Russian prisoners bound for the interior. Bodies are piled up at one end and each cart is near its bursting point. “Did you see that?” [Hals] whispered.

“They’ve piled up their dead to shield themselves from the wind.” In my stupefaction I could only reply with something like a groan. Every car was carrying a shield of human bodies. I stood as if petrified by the horror of the sight rolling by: faces entirely drained of blood, and bare feet stiffened by death and cold.⁶

The horror lies in seeing the dead disinterred and, perversely, used as tools, devoid of the dignity that civilized people expect from the dead. The bodies now possess pragmatic value that flies in the face of the sacred. In war, they have become tools for the living.

By the final days of the war, with the Russians clearly marching toward victory, witnessing death becomes banal. During the winter fighting north of Boporoeivska, 1944-45, Sajer recounts the vast numbers of Mongol soldiers employed on a minefield.

Their function was to knock out the minefield, by crossing it. As the Russians preferred to economize on tanks, and as their human stockpile was enormous, they usually sent out their

men for jobs of this kind.... The minefield exploded under the howling mob, and we sent out a curtain of yellow and white fire to obliterate anyone who survived. The fragmented cadavers froze very quickly, sparing us the stench which would otherwise have polluted the air over a vast area.⁷

There is an acclimatized perspective of the dead's place on the battlefield, reflected by Sajer's relief at their lack of stench.

Sajer also distinguishes the dead as "fragmented cadavers." This distinction is significant in understanding the horrific reality of Sajer's combat experience and, perhaps, as evidence toward the verity of his account. Writer and veteran Paul Fussell has argued that most history books fail to portray the gruesome reality of war. He accuses the most popular American and British pictorial works of the Second World War of showing only whole bodies, be they dead or wounded, and turning a blind eye to the more "realistic" side of combat:

In these [works], no matter how severely wounded, Allied troops are never shown suffering what was termed, in the Vietnam War, traumatic amputation: everyone has all of his limbs, hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer. And recalling Shakespeare and Goya, it would be a mistake to assume that dismembering was more common when warfare was largely a matter of cutting weapons, like swords and sabers. Their results are nothing compared to the work of bombs, machine guns, pieces of shell, and high explosives in general.⁸

Part of this hesitancy towards the reality of combat, of course, is a natural revulsion to the horrors of death, but it also grates against our civilized view of the dead as *remaining whole*. We wish to view the dead as we remembered them in life. It normalizes the experience of watching a loved one die. A "normal" corpse is integrally sound.

But as Fussell and others have demonstrated, whole cadavers are not the norm in modern warfare. Death in combat requires a rendering of a whole human being into parts, fragments, and undistinguishable "human material" on the battlefield, further distancing their association from their actual existence. Sajer's narrative, unlike the ones Fussell attacks, is rife with these visceral horrors, as the "mincemeat" of the Hitlerjugend illustrates.

On several occasions Sajer chooses to distinguish between a "corpse", "cadaver" or other term meaning whole with fragmented or mutilated human remains. While the

shock of seeing dead bodies wears off, replaced by a resigned dread, Sajer maintains a greater degree of revulsion for “pieces” of human remains, especially those that have been mistreated or degraded. Such grisly fates keep him from embracing death: there is nothing sacred about a mutilated corpse. His first experience with such mutilations, however, comes from the living. In a field hospital, Sajer holds a man’s leg as it is amputated. “I remained in ludicrous and tragic attitude, holding my hideous burden. I thought I was going to faint.”⁹ This is followed by degradation of the dead on the ground. As his unit marches toward the East, he is shocked to witness cats eating a corpse’s hand in a bunker. A Lieutenant, possibly fearing how the scene is affecting his men, throws a grenade into the bunker, sending “a column of more or less human debris into the air, like a chimney.” Pragmatically, someone quips that “If the cats are eating stiffs... there couldn’t be much left in the pantry,” though Sajer does not share his humour.¹⁰

The dead are also not to be trusted. With disgust, Sajer tells us of Stalin’s order to have bodies booby-trapped and mutilated; fallen comrades are made tools of the enemy.¹¹ Sajer cannot fathom his body becoming a weapon. But their desecration, more than their lethality, continues to horrify him. In the closing action of the war, Sajer and his comrades investigate a blockhouse with six mutilated bodies lying in black blood. Two were so repulsive they could not be looked at. “Two soldiers... who had seen appalling horrors... hid their faces in their hands and walked away. None of us had ever seen anything so gratuitously horrible.”¹² Sajer’s distaste of the dead crystallizes as he finds them a home beneath war’s septic soil.

No Sacred Ground

In peace, the dead do not dwell among the living but are appropriated a place of rest out of sight, visited only on sacred occasions. As the fighting in the Eastern Front consumed life at an incredible rate, graves were also dug in haste to accommodate their increasing numbers. But the graves of a war zone differ greatly from those of the civilized world. Sajer’s experience working with the dead reveal war’s degrading influence on a sacred act in human affairs, and heighten his resistance to sacrifice and his embracing of survival.

In the civilized world, the dead are placed in sacred ground, with religious markers used to denote the final resting place of the actual human remains. This norm is translated by the conditions of war to reflect both the values of home and the realities of the battlefield, which become all encompassing. Sajer often portrays the whole environment of war as a graveyard, devoid of the preciousness Dostoyevsky attributed to Europe in the nineteenth century. After the grand fighting in Kiev, he views a “landscape littered with carcasses of tanks, trucks, guns and aircraft, gutted and burned, a scattering of junk which stretched as far as the eye could see.” Next

to them he sees “Here and there, crosses or stakes marked the hasty burial of the thousands of German and Russian soldiers who had fallen on the plain.”¹³

This appearance of mutual respect for the war dead on both sides is deceiving. Sajer notes the difference in how comrade and enemy were buried.

In fact, many more Russians and Germans had been killed. However, insofar as was possible, the soldiers of the Reich were given decent burials, while each orthodox emblem marked the grave of ten or twelve Soviet soldiers. Our journey through across this boneyard naturally did not make us feel any warmer¹⁴

From what Sajer imparts, a “decent” burial meant an individual place of rest, as in a cemetery, not the expedient mass graves that would litter the Eastern Front, suitable only for the enemy. As the war in the East intensified, the importance of individual graves degrades, as does the sanctity of the dead. Burial squads were formed to gather bodies. Initially, Russian prisoners were tasked with this duty:

[B]ut it seemed they had taken to robbing the bodies, stealing wedding rings and other pieces of jewelry.... Every prisoner caught robbing a German body was immediately shot. There were no official firing squads for these executions. An officer would simply shoot the offender on the spot, or hand him over to a couple of toughs who were regularly given this sort of job.¹⁵

Upon reaching this final resting-place, the dead were to be treated with some reverence. For such, only German soldiers could be entrusted with their care.

Recovering the dead required disengaged participants. Bodies were often scattered in the rubble of battle, and to reach them required less than idealistic means. Sajer’s is assigned to a “burial party” to dig out an abandoned emergency hospital partially buried after a recent attack. The grim task is adhered to with a mix of horror and complacency. Each bed had black

...stiffened and mutilated bodies. From time to time, an empty space marked the final flight of a dying man.... There was no light in this charnel house, except from the electric torches which some of us had fastened to our tunics. These threw beams of horrifying illumination on the thin, swollen faces of the cadavers, which we had to pull out with hooks¹⁶

Here we see a clash of values. To save the dead, to get them to their rightful place, they must be mutilated. The realities of the war become the dominant value. Sajer must ruin the dead to get them out of the way of the living.

In war, the living struggle with the dead for primacy of place. The dead are to be expected but they are constantly in the way. Their physical presence becomes a burden to the living, depleting their sacred value. After the hellish fighting of Belgorod, Sajer and Hals seem to have lost much of their former reverence and sympathy for the dead. They thankfully avoid playing the “undertaker’s assistant” in another burial squad but watch the men dealing with their dead comrades with dull fascination.

“Fuck it... this fellow weighs a ton.”

“My God... he would have been better of if they’d finished him right away. Look at that!”

And then the metallic click as the identity tags slid off.

“Pach... he’s swimming in shit!”

We looked away with indifference; death had lost dramatic importance for us; we were used to it. While the others were shifting the carrion, Hals and I continued to discuss our chances of survival.¹⁷

Survival becomes Sajer’s watchword. He has moved among the dead, watching them fade in his mind as sacred beings and become the lifeless rubble of modern war. He has no wish to join their ranks, but this pull is challenged by the institution that has brought him to the precious graveyard in the first place. As a soldier, killing is only one part of victory. For the Germans, death was its indispensable ingredient.

Death as Obligation

War demands death from those who wage it, and the Second World War rivaled all previous conflicts by demanding millions on both sides to give the “the ultimate sacrifice.” Death is one of the unique demands the military makes of its members, and because it contrasts with man’s basic goal for survival, the military has made death, or *sacrifice*, a virtue, one that has become less and less enticing as standards of living have increased. At the turn of the century, German Colonel Wilhelm Balck, author of the influential treatises *Tactics*, feared that the post-industrial boom in Europe had degraded soldierly virtue:

We should not forget that our modern personnel have become more susceptible to the impressions of battle. The steady improvements of standard of living tend to increase

the instinct for self preservation and to diminish the spirit of self-sacrifice. The spirit of the times looks upon war as an avoidable evil and militates directly against the kind of courage that despises death. The fast manner of living at the present undermines the nervous system; and the fanaticism, the religious and national enthusiasm of yesterday are gone; finally, the physical powers of the human being are also on the wane.¹⁸

German Fuehrer Adolf Hitler heightened the need for fanaticism and sacrifice as he began his conquest in Europe. In September of 1941, he informed his generals that he intended not to conquer Poland but to destroy it, in order to make room for German Empire in the east:

The idea of treating war as anything other than the harshest means of settling questions of very existence is ridiculous.... Every war costs blood, and the smell of blood arouses in man all the instincts that have lain with us since the beginning of the world: deeds of violence, the intoxication of murder, and many other things. Everything else is babble. A humane war exists only in bloodless brains.¹⁹

Sajer acknowledges Hitler's claim when confronting death is an active presence on the battlefield, "The only leader I know who finally made a sensible remark on this point, Adolf Hitler, once said to his troops: 'Even a victorious army must count its victims.'"²⁰ Sajer's own desire for self-preservation was soon challenged not only by enemy fire but the German military's ethos of death as a soldier's obligation.

During the Second World War, the German military struggled to imbue the virtue of death upon its soldiers. The war in the east was to be one of annihilation and extermination. Death would be sequestered as an ally in this struggle, carrying a tone and degree of visceral importance that would be hard to imagine in Western armies. Before going into the storm of battle at Belgorod, Sajer listens to a Captain's speech on the need for sacrifice:

Not one of us has the right to flinch or falter in the face of momentary discouragement. No one has the right to doubt the heroism daily confirmed by our fresh victories. We all have to bear the same sufferings, and dealing with them as a unified group is the best way of surmounting them. Never forget the nation owes you everything, and that in return it expects everything from you, up to and including the

supreme sacrifice. You must learn to support suffering without complaint, because you are German. Heil Hitler!²¹

The elite Gross Deutschland unit that Sajer volunteers for further champions this ethos. The gateway to the training camp presents the motivational slogan inscribed in large black letters against a white background: “We Are Born to Die. I don’t think anyone could pass through that gate without a swallow of fear. A little further on another sign bore the words ICH DIENE (I Serve).”²² It took no stretch of imagination for Sajer or his comrades to see that death was not to be feared, but embraced. Indeed, death, like hardship, was their obligation as German soldier.

This was no idle comment for the Gross Deutschland. Death was active in their training camp as an outcome of poor results. Hellish and intense, trainees that could not pull their weight suffered depravity. The training camp provided a hut for disciplining the inefficient. Here, accused loafers were beaten and tortured while chained to a beam. Sajer recounts two men dying from their beatings, one from a coma and another shot for not pulling his weight.²³ Even here, away from the front, death was a constant. As the captain of the training camp swears them into the infantry, the unit conducts precision marching. “When we had reached the stipulated distance—about seven or eight yards—we snapped to attention, and declared in a loud, clear voice, “I swear to serve Germany and the Führer until victory or death.”²⁴ Sajer, like Hitler, knows that one cannot be had without the other. As the war turns against Germany, however, victory and death separate from each other, and Sajer struggles with his own existence in the face of defeat.

Death and the Soldier

Philosopher and Western Front veteran J. Glen Gray, in his touchstone work *The Warriors: Reflection of Men in Battle*, dedicates an entire chapter to understanding the soldier’s relationship with death. Gray emphasizes that in battle, soldiers face a perpetual *NOW* that obliterates self-analysis, and allows training and group dynamics to carry them past fear of their own mortality. They are caught up

...into the fire of communal ecstasy and forget about death by losing individuality, or they can function like cells in a military organism, doing what is expected of them because of warfare can still be carried on by men who act as automatons, behaving almost as mechanical as the machines they operate.²⁵

But Sajer’s narrative is a *recollection* of those moments when analysis is impossible. This distance in time allows him to comment on those moments before training takes over and the soldier acts as a “automaton.” He is only able to do this, of course,

because he survives. In doing so, Sajer feels guilty of committing a crime: avoiding the death owed to the army.

One's Own Death

For most green combat soldiers, one's own death is unthinkable; only experience dissolves this feeling. Fussell describes three stages in the process of this "slowly dawning and dreadful realization" of a soldier's personal mortality

1. It can't happen to me. I'm too clever / agile / well trained / good-looking / beloved / tightly laced, etc.²⁶

Recalling his anticipation before the battle of Belgorod, Sajer is firmly in stage one. Neither the scenes he has witnessed nor a soldier's value of sacrifice can penetrate this initial stage of invulnerable thinking. He even ascribes this feeling to every soldier.

We stood and stared at each other for a long time. Now we knew. We were going to be part of a full-scale attack. A heavy sense of foreboding settled over us, and the knowledge that soon some of use would be dead was stamped on every face. Even a victorious army suffers dead and wounded: the Führer himself had said it. In fact, none of us could imagine his own death. Some would be killed—we all knew that—but each one imagined himself doing the burying. No one, despite the obvious danger, could think of himself as mortally wounded. That was something that happened to other people—thousands of them—but never to oneself. Everyone clung to this idea, despite fear and doubt. Even the Hitlerjugend, who spent years cultivating the idea of sacrifice, could consciously envisage their own ends occurring within a few hours. One might be exalted by a grand idea based on a structure of logic, and even be prepared to run large risks, but to believe in the worst is impossible.²⁷

But after the bloodying experience of full industrial warfare against a resurgent Red Army, Sajer not only thinks of the worst as possible: it becomes the norm. He enters Fussell's next two stages of realization, that

2. It can happen to me, and I'd better be more careful. I can avoid the danger by watching more prudently the way I take

cover / dig in / expose my position by firing my weapon/keep extra alert at all times, etc. This conviction attenuates in turn to the perception that death and injury are more a matter of luck than skill, making inevitable the third stage of awareness:

3. It is *going* to happen to me, and only my not being there is going to prevent it.²⁸

Sajer is awakened to the fact that survival is a game of chance. But while he is not immune from the chaotic, impersonal nature of industrial war, he will not embrace death. He fears becoming the degraded cadavers he has been forced to march through, bury, and create:

It would probably be my turn soon. I would be killed, just like that, and no one would even notice. We had all grown used to just about everything, and I would be missed only until the next fellow got it, wiping out the memory of preceding tragedies. As my panic rose, my hands began to tremble. I knew how terrible people looked when they were dead. I'd seen plenty of fellows fall face down in a sea of mud, and stay like that. The idea made me cold with horror... Hals was looking at me, as still as that horrible landscape, indifferent to suffering, death, everything. There was nothing we could do about it—the sufferings of fear, the groans of the dying, the torrents of blood soaking into the ground like a vile sacrilege—nothing. Millions of men could suffer and weep and scream, and the war would go on, implacable and indifferent. We could only wait and hope, but hope for what? To escape dying face down in the mud?²⁹

Escaping death is not enough to sustain Sajer, if it means simply to continue to face the horror of the war and the inevitability of his own death. Walking into a debris-strewn area, ideal for Russian snipers, he accepts the fact that above all else he wants to survive.

Each bullet they fired was bound to be to hit someone, and if I should happen to be the only casualty in a victorious army of a million men, the victory would be without interest to me. The

percentage of corpses, in which generals sometimes take pride, doesn't alter the fate of the men who've been killed.³⁰

Even if the German army is victorious Sajer cannot find comfort in his own sacrifice. Survival maintains the highest value. When it becomes clear that victory is impossible, fighting against death, fighting *to live*, was the only legitimate reason that could sustain him against the war's deprivations:

We fought from simple fear, which was the motivating power. The idea of death, even when we accepted it, made us howl with powerless rage. We fought for reasons which are perhaps shameful, but are, in the end, stronger than any doctrine. We fought for ourselves, so that we wouldn't die in holes filled with mud and snow; we fought like rats, which do not hesitate to spring with all their teeth bared when they are cornered by man infinitely larger than they are.³¹

The shame Sajer mentions is that he is no longer fighting for Germany, because that would require his death, but instead he fights for life in a world where his army is defeated.

Death Their Enemy

Sajer is rife with regret over his survival, because it denies him from achieving a good death, though he is quick to point out the unlawful deaths he witnessed and despised. Throughout the narrative Sajer disdains executions of prisoners. Recalling the execution of a dreaded partisan fighter, he is "overwhelmed" by the act.³² He also rallies against the German practice of executing Russian prisoners:

Once, to my horror, I saw one of these [executioner] thugs tying the hands of three prisoners to the bars of the gate. When the victim had been secured, he stuck a grenade into the pocket of one of the coats, pulled the pin, and ran for shelter. The three Russians, whose guts were blown out, screamed for mercy until the final moment.³³

Sajer implies that killing (the creation of the dead) should only take place in battle. He is not swayed by arguments of retribution for equally repugnant Soviet treatment of German prisoners. The dead are only to be made in battle. And for those deaths to have any meaning, they had to be incurred from external sources.

After combat, Sajer and others regularly killed their own men to put them out of their misery, “although mercy killings were strictly forbidden.”³⁴ Yet suicide is not contemplated. Indeed, it is only mentioned in a few instances. The first comes after serious defeat and retreat in 1944. Sajer claims that the only thing keeping the men from committing suicide was hope that they would retreat to Germany where they would regroup and fight on, making survival as much a virtue as sacrifice.³⁵ But the only suicides Sajer recalls occurred during the final retreat from Memel, where they were performed by civilians, in public, without interference.³⁶

In that hellish end stage, when defeat was indeed imminent, Sajer attempts to blend these extremes. He could not bring himself to suicide. Death had to come from outside himself as it had to all the others he had served with and lost. Failing to die in battle and fearful of living in defeat, he orders a soldier to kill him, a mercy killing where the only wound is the mortal one. This soldier refuses to fire, but instead demands Sajer kill him! Neither can bring themselves to do it and so Sajer survives this insane episode to run to the west.³⁷ Sajer’s reluctance to join the dead by suicide and his failure to obtain a mock mercy killing reflect two separate ideals: Sajer’s desire for life and his understanding of a worthy death required of a German soldier.

Heroes in Death

Like Valhalla, the mythical hall of the dead in Norse mythology, Sajer’s book is filled with only dead heroes: a status denied the living. Only certain kinds of death would make a hero. Fighting at the Dnieper, Sajer recalls

The Wehrmacht, adhering strictly to orders, sacrificed many more men on this belated retreat than they had during their advance. We died by the thousands that autumn [1943] on the Ukrainian plain, and our battles, unheralded by any fanfare, consumed many heroes.³⁸

The heroic dead are not solely consigned to the Germans. Russians also earn a hero’s death. Sajer is convinced that the Russians do not fear death, allowing them an incredible tactical advantage. “[E]ven the blindest saw that the Russian soldiers were moved by a blind heroism and boldness, so that even a mountain of dead compatriots wouldn’t stop them.”³⁹ It is a sign of Sajer’s reverence for death (not the dead) as well as his general sympathy for the Russian soldier (though not partisans), that he can attribute heroism and not savagery as his enemies driving force through heaps of their own dead.⁴⁰

Heroes are food for the war; dying is their final act to achieve a revered status. Sajer, as a survivor, is not willing to pay the price to become a hero. Sajer only includes himself alongside the heroic dead to describe their hopeless position

We knew our sacrifice was in a good cause, and if our courage incited us to hours of resignation, the hours and days which followed would find us with dry eyes which were filled with an immense sadness. Then we would fire in a lunatic frenzy, without mercy. We didn't wish to die, and would kill and massacre as if to avenge ourselves in advance for what we knew was going to happen. When we died, it was with fury, because we hadn't been able to exact enough retribution. And if we survived, it was as if as madmen, never able to readapt to the peacetime world.⁴¹

Sajer forestalls this madness by writing his story, creating a sacred place for the dead beyond defeat. It borders on apologia for Hitler's army's conduct and efforts in the war, absolving them of the reasons for fighting for anything other than survival.

We performed deeds of astounding heroism, which demonstrated once again the extraordinary resourcefulness of our soldiers. The weather was still good, and we fought many successful battles. However, these are victories which can never be celebrated. *An army fighting for its life cannot speak of victory.*⁴²

Victory itself is now dead, something that the living, regardless of their efforts, cannot achieve. Death and victory become entwined, as do survival and defeat. Sajer becomes a model of this survival, standing in stark contrast to what his narrative depicts as a victory in death.

The Paragon of Death

After training in the Gross Deutschland, Sajer comes under the command of Captain Wesreidau. Throughout the narrative, Wesreidau is remembered as the one good official of the German Army, and the most knowledgeable about life and death. He, more than anyone, translates the value of death to his men with sagacious roughness. Sajer recalls Wesreidau's stirring speech that sustained the men as the fighting intensified. Wesreidau informs them that they are fighting for German survival. "That's why you're fighting... you're nothing more than animals

on the defensive, even when you're obliged to take the offensive. So be brave: life is war, and war is life. Liberty doesn't exist."⁴³

In this grossly apologetic speech, Wesreidau informs the men that they require a perspective in war that differs greatly from that they have known. They will be killing and dying and that this is the way of things: "Even if we don't always approve of what we have to do, we must carry out orders for the sake of our country, our comrades, and our families against whom the other half of the world is fighting in the name of truth and justice."⁴⁴ Wesreidau claims to have traveled around the world and seen that every world system is just as full of lies as their own. "I can tell you that everywhere there are the same dominating hypocrisies. Life, my father, the example of former times—all of these taught me to sustain my existence with rectitude and loyalty." Here Sajer may have gained his revulsion of suicide. Wesreidau humbly imparts upon his subordinates that "rectitude and loyalty" have kept him from killing himself in the face of the horror of war.⁴⁵ For Wesreidau, life *and* death without victory is pointless, but only victory will give their deaths meaning and absolve them from the judgment of history.

We shall be accused of an infinity of murder, as if everywhere, and at all times, men at war did not behave in the same way. Those who have an interest in putting an end to our ideals will ridicule everything we believe in. We shall be spared nothing. *Even the tombs of our heroes will be destroyed, only preserving—as a gesture of respect toward the dead—a few which contain figures of doubtful heroism, who were never fully committed to our cause.* With our deaths all the prodigies of heroism which our daily circumstances require of us, and the memory of our comrades, dead and alive, and our communion of spirits, our fears and our hopes, will vanish, and our history will never be told. Future generations will speak only of an idiotic, unqualified sacrifice. Whether you wanted it or not, you are now part of this undertaking, and nothing which follows can equal the efforts you have made, if you must sleep tomorrow under the quieter skies of the opposite camp. In that case you will never be forgiven for having survived. You will either be rejected or preserved like rare animals which has escaped cataclysm. With other men, you will be as cats are to dogs, and you will never have any real friends. Do you wish such an end for yourselves?⁴⁶

While this speech is intended to inspire broken soldiers, the last clauses tie victory to death. Life in defeat will be unacceptable. So they must bury all else but the will to victory. The volume of the dead and the actions of the living have made life without victory enslavement, and silently marked between these thoughts is the belief that death would be preferable to the unforgivable sin of desertion and survival. This is confirmed in the second part of his speech.

We are surrounded by hatred and death, and in our circumstances we shall daily oppose our perfect cohesion to the indiscipline and disorder of our enemies. Our group must be as one, and our thoughts must be identical. Your duty lies in your efforts to achieve that goal, and if we do achieve it, and maintain it we shall be victorious *even in death*.⁴⁷

Again, there is a Norse feel toward this final parcel of wisdom. Sajer's recreation of Wesreidau's speech is meant to convey the hardness the Captain required of his men, and the need for unity of purpose against the growing odds in Russia's favour. These are of course the sound statements of an officer attempting to maintain control of his men in desperate times, but what defines them is his final sentence. Their actions in this world will follow them into the next one. Death is not a resting place, but another realm of their struggle. Defeat and victory will follow them into the grave, like the Scandinavian warriors of the dark ages, who believed actions in this life would earn them a place in Valhalla.

Sajer expresses his sympathy with this Nordic virtue when Wesreidau is mortally wounded and knocked unconscious after their convoy is attacked. The entire company surrounds the dying captain, who Sajer says has been the one friend they have had, and manage to rouse him to consciousness. In a scene almost too noble for the circumstances, the captain addresses his men for the last time.

Unlike everyone else we had watched, our captain did not have a face twisted by the revulsion and agony of death. His swollen face even managed to smile. We thought we had saved him. In a very weak voice he spoke of our collective adventure, stressing our unity, which must hold in the face of everything to come. He pointed to one of his pockets, from which Feldwebel Sperlovski pulled an envelope, undoubtedly addressed to his family. After that, for nearly a minute, we watched our chief die. Our faces, used to such spectacles, remained impassive. But the silence was terrible.⁴⁸

For Sajer, this was a good death: in service, with his men, strong enough to resist a face “twisted by revulsion and agony of death.” Writing in defeat, Sajer gives an otherwise unknown historical personage a place of rest in narrative form. This becomes his burden of, and obligation for, survival.

Conclusion: Literary Death

To the relief of the world, the German war machine was defeated at incredible cost in blood and treasure. History condemned Germany for unleashing fresh horror in form of Nazism combined with German militarism. Sajer lives in this defeat with his guilt. His narrative begins with his metaphorical marriage to the war, but he cannot follow it to its ultimate destination: death without victory. Walking through the upturned precious graveyard of Europe on the Eastern Front, Sajer’s confrontations with the dead drive him to crave survival. The dead are not sacred in war. They are tools, they are debris, they are weapons. Sajer, who survives war’s lottery of death in battle, is forced to deal with existence in defeat. Failure to win and failure to die compel Sajer to recount his life after the war as a burden:

People at peace with themselves have no idea that anyone unaccustomed to happiness shouts himself breathless in the face of joy. I was the one who had to try to understand, to adapt myself to this mood of tranquility, to avoid shocking anyone, to smile a correct smile, neither too wide nor too tense. At the risk of seeming wild or apathetic, I had to make the effort, to invent, and avoid the impression I often felt I was making in France, after the war, of telling boring stories. I often felt like killing the people who then accused me of lying. It is so easy to kill—especially when no one longer feels any particular link with existence. I—a poor bastard soldier in the wrong army—I had to learn how to live, because I hadn’t been able to die.⁴⁹

In the final pages of *The Forgotten Soldier*, while watching a memorial parade in Paris in 1946, Sajer remembers the war dead. He cannot include himself among them. As a survivor, Sajer, after speaking for the dead, chooses not to bury himself alongside his own comrades, even in memory; he will not commit literary suicide. Instead he chooses amnesia.

I shall never forget the names of Hals, or Lindberg, or Pferham, or Wollars. Their memory lives within me.

There is another man, whom I must forget. He was called Guy Sajer.⁵⁰

The dead are to be remembered, Sajer implies, but the defeated living should be forgotten, including those speaking for the dead. That is a very human paradox, befitting a man who survived the horrific war in the precious graveyard of Eastern Europe, 1942-1945. But one should be careful of how much sympathy it draws. Millions of Allied soldiers did not live to see victory against Nazism, and Sajer's guilt in defeat is a small price to pay for serving in Hitler's army. But the value of *The Forgotten Soldier* as a document of human experience of war remains valid and useful. His fear and reverence for death allow us to see through his eyes a war of horrific dimensions. So armed, we may understand the effect of modern war on soldiers who must always walk where death is ever present.

Notes

1. See Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict* (New York: Quill, 1965), Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 2003).
2. Sajer, 83.
3. Sajer, p. 187.
4. Sajer, p. 189.
5. Sajer, p. 190.
6. Sajer, p. 21.
7. Sajer, p. 345.
8. Fussell, p. 275.
9. Sajer, p. 47.
10. Sajer, p. 106-107.
11. Sajer, p. 332.
12. Sajer, p. 337.
13. Sajer, p. 37-38
14. Sajer, p. 37-38
15. Sajer, p. 118-119.

16. Sajer, p. 119.
17. Sajer, p. 196-197.
18. Quoted in Antulio J. Echevarria II, "On the Brink of the Abyss: The Warrior Identity and German Military Thought before the Great War," *War and Society* 13 2 (October 1995), p. 25.
19. Quoted in Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 2003), p. 4.
20. Sajer, p. 297.
21. Sajer, p. 39.
22. Sajer, p. 159.
23. Sajer, p. 167.
24. Sajer, p. 168.
25. J. Glen Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections of Men in Battle* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 102.
26. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behaviour in the Second World War* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 282.
27. Sajer, p. 175.
28. Fussell, p. 282.
29. Sajer, p. 245.
30. Sajer, p. 297.
31. Sajer, p. 316.
32. Sajer, p. 36.
33. Sajer, p. 118-119.
34. Sajer, p. 262.
35. Sajer, p. 388.
36. Sajer, p. 416.
37. Sajer, p. 410.
38. Sajer, p. 220.
39. Sajer, p. 220.
40. Sajer, p. 220.
41. Sajer, p. 220.

42. Sajer, p. 221, italics added.
43. Sajer, p. 216.
44. Sajer, p. 216.
45. Sajer, p. 216.
46. Sajer, p. 216-218. Italics added.
47. Sajer, p. 216. Italics added.
48. Sajer, p. 375.
49. Sajer, p. 175.
50. Sajer, p. 465.



JASON S. RIDLER is a writer and Ph.D. candidate in War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. He has published works of crime, fantasy, horror and science fiction, as well as academic articles on war and technology. He is currently completing a biography of Canadian defence scientist Omond M. Solandt. He lives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.