

Tales from the Indescribable Inferno - War In Contemporary World Literature

Sigrid Loeffler, Spitz an der Donau, October 25th, 2014.

There is a perception in the world today that contemporary German literature is distinctly different from foreign language literature, especially that from outside Europe. Contemporary German literature does have, in general, an inclination to retreat into the private sphere, to escape into the realm of the idyllic...to withdraw too readily into the search for private happiness, in which a favourite theme is the domain of the family. It tends to shun political issues. German-language authors, who, for example, quite reasonably write about war, civil war and the crisis of terrorism in the world today, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. I could mention here Sherko Fatah's and Abbas Khider's novels about Iraq, or Thomas Lehr's novel *Fata Morgana*, also set in Iraq. There are few others. It is not as if there is a literary taboo on the portrayal of war...not at all. It is, rather, that the issue seems to be far from the hearts of German authors: they prefer to leave it to the newspapers and TV news programmes.

Present day German-language literature does in the main display a strong bias against dealing with the core questions and problems of the world today – it shirks them. It prefers to describe the joys of uneventfulness. It seems to start from the unspoken premise that analysing present-day issues will upset the reader and so largely avoids this in favour of the private contemplation of the self in a calm, non-political atmosphere.

The situation is quite different in foreign literature, especially that in non-European languages. Here, we find writers taking up the most fraught political and social issues and examining their impact on the individual. They provide a sensitive early-warning system for the pressing issues of our time and for the alarmingly misguided developments world-wide. They open up new realms of experience and lay out wide-ranging historical and political scenarios. They take as their themes these burning issues, primarily war and world crises, in all their day-to-day explosiveness, and their repercussions for individual men and women.

A considerable segment of current, mainly non-European literature is war literature, and it comes in quite distinct forms. On the one hand, we have war literature, which is authentic *Veterans' Literature*. Here, the authors are trying to exorcise the terrors, which they themselves as soldiers experienced on the battlefield. They tell stories from the front-line, whether it be in Chechnya or Georgia, Afghanistan or Iraq, or in the various wars waged by Israel against her neighbours. The most basic human ordeals emerge from these war experiences: fear, sorrow, death. But war also becomes a touchstone for human behaviour: courage, cowardice, loyalty, betrayal. When we look more closely, we can see that this war literature is mainly what we might call *accusatory literature*: it borders on *anti-war literature*. Examples of this are the books by the Russian Arkady Babchenko and the Israeli authors Yoram Kaniuk

and Ron Leshem. The indictment is that war is presented as a supposedly noble and patriotic enterprise, when the reality is that war is a dirty business.

On the other hand, we have war literature that focuses on the psychological consequences of contemporary wars and the events surrounding them on the individual, on society, on cultures and on value systems. The theme here is of the transformatory power of war: how war destroys societies; fragments their cohesiveness and creates chaos; changes geographical frontiers; and calls into question the meaning of traditional values like courage, loyalty and the willingness to make sacrifices.

In these stories, it's not primarily about describing the detail of battle as such, or the profession of being a killer. It's much more about how the corrosive power of war reflects indirectly and individually on those involved. This *Reflective War Literature* is extremely extensive, diverse and morally complex. Its authors are not drawing on their own experience of war, at least only very rarely. In the main, they meditate on wars that they have not experienced at first hand, perhaps because they are too young, as in the case of Nadifa Mohamed, Dinaw Mengistu and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who have, respectively, written about the origins of the civil wars in Somalia, Uganda and Biafra, wars which they have not themselves experienced because of when they were born. In most cases, these novels are based on the war memories and stories of parents and grandparents.

War literature is *per se* a paradox. It transforms war – essentially a destructive phenomenon – into an aesthetically creative act. It is also paradoxical, because it often arises from the author's motivation to understand war and to make it more comprehensible than it actually is. The inferno of war is impossible to describe, according to the Iraqi author, Najem Wali. The paradox again is that he makes this assertion in his novel *Baghdad Marlboro*, which is itself a war novel that describes the hell that was the Iraq war in both realistic and surrealistic narratives.

So war literature, in that it tries to tell the untellable, is accompanied by multifarious risks. Every representation of war is, in the parlance, a minefield of clichés. Precisely because there have been war stories as long as men have been fighting wars, and because we have been reading about war as long as there have been books to read about it in, we have had our fill of every conceivable type of war literature. The stylish can so easily merge into cliché: only war can make a man...no man comes out of war the same man that went into it...truth is the first casualty of war...every war is worse than predicted. Pure cliché. It blossoms in war literature now as then.

Ever since the horrors of the First World War, when the annihilation of huge numbers of fighting men was organised down to the last technically perfected detail, literature that glorifies war is no longer flavour of the month. It has been impossible since then to represent war in ways that suggest it is romantic, uplifting or heroic. War is no longer the ultimate 'high'. On the contrary, the prevailing style that emerged has been one of chill, sober disillusion, à la Hemingway; a style which, in the case of Ernst Jünger, for example, boils over into being "furiously unmoved", to quote the critic Lothar Müller. It's often from this just a short step into cynicism. Calm acceptance has to be established in cold cadences. In war, horror not infrequently

borders on the absurd, so writers often respond with black humour, or satire or surrealist alienation. Surrealism becomes a form of self-protection, of distancing themselves from the murderous pressure of warfare. Despair is concealed behind sarcasm, and at times behind that lies a bizarre inner rage at the ending of their own personal world.

However, the majority of these authors are concerned with factual accuracy and the most precise and objective way to present the detail of war – with the aim of documenting it, so that the facts cannot be distorted and used as propaganda. But such realism brings its own dilemma: the more realistic their description of the horrors of war, the greater the danger it will be read with sadistic pleasure. The writer of realism always runs the risk that they unwittingly glorify violence, mask people's suffering, and by exploiting warfare in their writing, offering the reader a voyeuristic or sadistic experience. The reader sits in safety, far from the battlefield, but vicariously feels the thrill of being close to danger, without the slightest risk to themselves personally.

I would now like to further illustrate these general points with examples from some selected war novels. I have chosen examples of both *Veterans'* and *Reflective War Literature*.

I shall begin with the Russian journalist and author Akcady Babchenko. He was born in Moscow in 1977 and was called up for military service as an 18-year old. He was happy to be posted to the Caucasus, because the climate was warm down there; then he found himself plunged into the first Chechen War, with no idea what he had let himself in for. He volunteered to serve in the second Chechen War, and was paid 900 US dollars a month. This was how he tried to regain control over his life.

Babchenko has written two autobiographical accounts of his experiences in the two Chechen Wars, instigated by post-Soviet Russia: *One Soldier's War*, in 2007, and *A Good Place to Die* in 2009. He has also published a collection of his reportage over the past ten years: *A Day is a Lifetime: War Reports* (2014).

Babchenko recounts how he has been bedevilled by a love of war. He can't write about anything else. "*War*", he says, "*is the most powerful drug there is.*" In his first two books, he describes in merciless detail the cruelty meted out to recruits in their training camp by the officers in charge, how they were tormented and maltreated. The agonies of starvation and the orgies of beating were so horrific that the recruits almost longed to be sent to the frontline in Chechnya. There were no post-war support programmes for the more than a million Russian soldiers, who fought in Chechnya: many are still suffering from post-traumatic stress, including Babchenko himself. "*Writing is my way to psychological rehabilitation,*" he says.

When war broke out between Russia and Georgia over the break-away province of South Ossetia, Babchenko immediately went back to the Caucasus. In order to be able to report all the action, he enlisted as a volunteer so that he could get into the South Ossetian capital - which had already been bombed by the Georgian military - as fast as he could.

Babchenko's reportage in his latest book is staccato, his sentences pounded out in a breathless, edgy present tense, which tells us just how far war fever has gripped him once again. His prose takes on the cold, insensitive tone of the cynical, hardened war veteran, someone whom nothing can distress. He has the smell of corpses in his nostrils, he has the grenade-shattered bodies of soldiers lying by the roadside in his sights and he hesitates only briefly over whether to photograph the burnt corpse of a Georgian tank driver. *"Have I the right to do this? In the end I took the decision, I took the picture. That's what I came here to do. I can debate the ethics back in Moscow."*

These volunteers are a motley, dubious bunch of mercenaries and old warhorses, warriors for rent, from all over the region, driven by questionable motives and lured by the clamour of wars that are not theirs: veterans of Afghanistan, fighters from Dagestan, Kalmucks and even Chechens. They are a complex group, in which the normal definitions of friend and foe are no longer valid.

It's striking how this author strives to deal with both the warring parties fairly. This is different from his two books on Chechnya, which present unconfirmed rumours of atrocities as if they were facts; in this book, Babchenko scrutinises all the statistics of those killed in action and all the claims of genocide and massacres of civilians. He is suspicious of the war propaganda from both sides, and states: *"There is no question here about mass executions or ethnic cleansing. I have tried to remain objective."*

Nonetheless, we can't ignore that his basic position is polemic and accusatory. Babchenko is pointing the finger at Russia, this *"...empire that craves world status yet treats its own people like animals..."*; he accuses every Russian President, be he Yeltsin, Medvedyev or Putin, of using the youth of Russia as cannon fodder in senseless and unnecessary wars. One and a half million veterans, whose average age is getting younger and younger, have been betrayed by their government and left to fend for themselves. Their re-integration into civil society hasn't worked; the wounded have not been given adequate pensions and have been left destitute. They sit in the streets of Moscow, mutilated young beggars: *"You find them in the pedestrian subways. There are three of them, who sit there every morning, near my Metro station. Between them they have five medals, six crutches, two artificial limbs and just one leg. They share one thing: hatred. Hatred of the whole world."*

We can read Babchenko's distressing collection of war reports and descriptions of war veterans as an attempt to get this festering injustice onto the public agenda and to examine the traumatic effects of war on his generation. He calls the two Chechen Wars *"...ill considered, incomprehensible and totally unnecessary."* Because they were in no way justifiable, the plight of the veterans has been officially hushed up. There has been no recognition whatsoever of their sacrifice and suffering. They have been left to ponder alone on their deeds – and misdeeds – in the Caucasus. *"The result is a generation of enraged young men, who hate everyone and everything."*

Israel is another state with many young war veterans. One could go so far as to say that all young Israeli men are either serving soldiers or veterans. That has in fact been the case ever since the state was founded over 60 years ago. And as the war

literature coming out of Israel shows, many of those veterans are no less embittered than the Russian, Arkady Babchenko.

The Israeli author, Yoram Kaniuk, was one of the generation who were eye-witnesses of the founding of the state in 1948. Just before he died in 2013, at the high old age of 83, he posed the question of exactly what happened – and what didn't happen – during the Israeli War of Independence, in which he fought as a 17-year old and was severely injured.

Kaniuk calls *1948*, his book of memoirs, a novel...and with good reason. So many decades on, he can't trust his powers of recall, for memories are deceptive: "*I am not sure just what I am remembering.*" He asks himself: "*Where exactly was I back then, what in fact did I do?*" And he comes to the conclusion that memories serve the same purpose as novels: they are retrospective constructions of events. "*Memory is what I write down.*" One's own memory is, in the final analysis, just a novel about one's own life.

With all its shortcomings, this premise underpins Yoram Kaniuk's most personal, most honest and most pitiless dissection of his own memories, in which he seeks to unearth and bring to light the feelings and actions of the young man he then was, filtered through decades of forgetfulness and later memories, beset by memory lapses, false recalls and blind spots.

"We were like children, just cocky young men, we signed up as volunteers. We were simpletons, partisans." At the age of seventeen, Kaniuk left his grammar school in Tel Aviv in the twelfth grade, shortly before the UN partitioned Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, and joined the *Palmach*, the paramilitary wing of the underground army, the *Haganah*, which later formed the core of the Israeli Defence Forces.

Kaniuk and other teenagers like him set out to be heroes and to strike down the enemy. It was a "*Children's Crusade*". But poorly trained and badly armed as they were, they rushed into senseless bloodbaths and massacres, into death, severe injury and mutilation, almost missing out on the foundation of the Israeli state in the process. They were so deeply involved in battles with Arab troops in the siege of Jerusalem, that they were hardly aware that Israel had come in to being.

The Jews and Arabs fought a dirty and extremely cruel war, there were massacres and much blood spilt on both sides; civilians, children and even nuns were killed; the indigenous Arab population either fled or were driven out of their villages. Above all, the young, inexperienced Jewish soldiers were killed in great numbers, abandoned to their fate by their leaders in mid-battle.

Yoram Kaniuk remembers a key event during these battles, a moment when the existence of the new state hung in the balance. He thinks the decisive moment in the War of Independence was when they took the village of Kastel: "*It was the first time we had captured a village. The road to Jerusalem now lay before us. The Arabs could have re-taken Kastel, but they wanted first to bury their dead leader (the Palestinian commander Abdel-Qadr-al-Husseini) and so missed a victory, which could have given them a good chance to defeat us in that abomination of a war.*"

The phrase to note here is “*that abomination of a war*”. The clearer Yoram Kaniuk’s memories become as he writes, the more tormented and bitter are his words. He recalls not just hunger, thirst, lack of sleep, stupid and mindless fighting and his own desensitisation, as his comrades are killed or injured all around him; he also remembers his guilt and the collapse of his own moral values: in a tight corner, in a moment of desperation, he shot an eight-year-old Arab boy. That dead boy has assumed the status of an icon in Kaniuk’s personal mythology and to this day it brings him no comfort when his comrades try to ease his conscience, saying the only important thing is that “*we have an Israeli state and we created it with blood.*”

In the final chapter of *1948*, Kaniuk rails in pain and scorn against the official history of Israel: this celebrates the heroic deeds of *Palmach* leaders like Yitzhak Rabin and Moshe Dayan, but has nothing to say about the sacrifices of the other ranks. Whilst the commanders and their cronies enriched themselves as they carved up the so-called “*abandoned Arab property*” amongst themselves, Kaniuk denounces them thus: “*...we, the foot soldiers, the majority of those who fought [that war], we who did the work, we who survived, we were left with nothing.*” Their memory has been extinguished, swept under the carpet.

Yoram Kaniuk creates a memorial to his forgotten comrades with these words: “*They weren’t a nice bunch. They were a brilliant and brutal, clever and courageous, angry tool that, without knowing it, set out on the road to build a state for the Jewish people.*” What remains, behind all the heroic courage, is the awareness of a historical injustice, a historical guilt, which is written into the founding of the state of Israel. This is what makes Kaniuk’s honest book such a disquieting read, and one which is all the more important, as Israel hardens its stance towards its Arab neighbours and so makes hope for a peaceful settlement the more remote.

Two generations later, the Israeli Journalist and author Ron Leshem writes about his similar wartime experiences to those of Yoram Kaniuk. He likewise pillories the abomination of war. His first novel, published in 2008, was *Beaufort*: it’s not first and foremost an anti-war novel but rather an indictment of Israel’s military leaders. He takes aim at Israeli defence policy, which he says squanders and sacrifices the lives of soldiers senselessly and without any clear objective. “*Squander*” is a key word in this novel.

Leshem backs up his criticisms with specific examples: a place and an event from Israel’s long history of warfare with her Arab neighbours, namely the mountain-top fortress of Beaufort, a former crusader castle in south Lebanon. It was captured by an Israeli elite unit in 1982. It was converted into a military base and held as a forward outpost for eighteen years, at great human and material cost. For most of that time, it served as the important central defence facility in the north, for holding Hizbollah back from the Israeli border. But in 2000, after eighteen years, Beaufort was abruptly evacuated. As the Israelis pulled out of Lebanon, the base was abandoned and blown up on the grounds that it was strategically unimportant.

It is precisely this strategic panic that is the object of censure in this novel. It tells the story of the last Israeli combat unit stationed in Beaufort and how they had at first to defend the fortress and then suddenly withdraw from it...to defend it because it was

important, then to abandon it, because it was unimportant. The criticism is that the Israeli government had taken a secret decision to withdraw from Lebanon much earlier, but in spite of this had left very young soldiers for a whole year, senselessly to fight on and die there. This bare mountain-top, according to Ron Leshem, was just not worth such a sacrifice in human lives. His war novel is about squandered idealism, emotional insincerity in the military high command and above all, about the absurdity of modern warfare.

In the writings of Babchenko, Kaniuk and Leshem we see that soldiers are also the victims of war. But even more so are civilians, especially when they find themselves between the two front lines in a civil war...and in particular, when there are no longer any clear front lines, when war is waged in people's own homes, and residential districts become killing fields. The victims of these civil wars and how they react are the subject of most *Reflective War Novels*. I would like to talk briefly about a couple of the most noteworthy of these now.

When you read Anthony Marra's first novel, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, it's hard to believe that this young American author (born in 1984) has learnt almost everything he knows about Chechnya from books. He owes much of the detail in his novel about the sufferings of the civil population in the two Chechen Wars to the murdered Moscow journalist Anna Politovskaya. Her reports describe the almost surreal daily life of ordinary Chechens, who saw their homes suddenly transformed into slaughterhouses and whose sole objective from then on was to survive in the middle of a warzone.

Certainly, the novel Anthony Marra has produced based on Anna Politovskaya's data and the information he gleaned from a short trip to the Caucasus, is remarkable in its complexity, its literary depth and its comprehensive detail. *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* combines research with imaginative invention and psychological empathy and – something which is unusual in a first novel – not the slightest trace of autobiographical material. Apart from the capital Grozny, the action takes place in a fictitious village and the hospital in Voltshansk, another invented location, in the decade 1994 to 2004.

Marra tells a powerful, graphic and moving story about an eight-year-old Chechen girl and the three adults who care for her amid the chaos of the fighting between Chechen rebels and Russian troops. After her father is first tortured then abducted by the occupying forces, the child also comes under threat of abduction and it falls to two doctors, Akhmed and Sonja, to hide her in their hospital and so to save her life.

The two doctors could not be more different characters: Akhmed can best be described as a trainee doctor, but is a man with great social skills; Sonja is a surgeon, self-sacrificing but curt in manner, who hides behind her steely exterior a deep private pain over her renegade sister. Together with a single nurse, they manage to keep their half-destroyed hospital running. The three of them work tirelessly and thanklessly to take care of fighters from both sides, Russians and rebels alike, as well as civilian casualties – which means mainly amputating limbs from the victims of landmines. The hospital is an absolute madhouse, a totally surreal place... yet, at the same time, it is a sanctuary, a humane refuge.

Anthony Marra interlinks a series of individual stories to recount the survival strategies of his characters: village neighbours, fathers, mothers, childhood friends, married couples. They don't support either of the warring sides, they aren't political nor particularly religious...they simply want to get by in a town, where everywhere they walk, they "*get shards of glass from broken windows in their shoes*"; where they only know where the unexploded shells are, because someone has marked the spot by putting upturned toilet bowls over them as a protection in case they explode, for "*those bowls are the only decent things the Soviets left behind— they're unbreakable.*"

Some people struggle only for themselves: they smuggle weapons, become black-market dealers, scrap-dealers or human traffickers. "*Scrap metal and disappearances – our national industries*" declares one character. One man has been so brutally tortured for so long, that he turns paid informer and denounces half his village to the Russian troops. Others strive, amid the fear, destruction, treachery and bestiality, to maintain some humanity in their relationships with their fellow men: to prevent the collapse of the village community, to help their neighbours, to take in refugees, to honour the dead, and to preserve the memory of what the Chechen people were and are.

The chronicler and village-historian who does this is Chassan, one of the many impressive fictional characters created by Anthony Marra. Chassan has already lived through the enforced re-settlement of Chechens to Kazakhstan and Central Asia under Stalin. When Khrushchev allowed them to return to their homeland in 1957, Chassan dug up the bones of his parents and brought them back home in a brown coffin. Thereafter, he worked on a history of his people and his parents, "*...this small part of humanity, which the world seems determined to forget.*" He toiled for four decades on his outline of Chechen history, thousands of pages which he was required to change, shorten, or revise, according to the demands of the Soviet censors. Now, he no longer believes the Chechen people have any future, and Chassan burns his manuscript. But this act does not mean the world of the Chechens will sink into oblivion: at least not as long as people read Anthony Marra's epic war story.

Let's now turn from Chechnya to Africa. Africa's civil wars, failed states and violent, corrupt rulers are a central theme of contemporary African literature. It's remarkable how even younger authors, who have no personal experience of the civil wars in Biafra, Somalia or Uganda, have written so intensely about these traumatic events in their home countries...authors such as the Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie, Nadifa Mohamed from Somalia and Dinaw Mengestu from Ethiopia.

The civil war in Biafra was the first fall from grace in post-colonial Africa. This attempt at secession from Nigeria in 1967 by the Igbo people, and the short-lived republic of Biafra that followed, was attended by massacres and mass killings and ended in a three-year long civil war and a catastrophic famine on an unheard-of scale. The food blockade led to nearly six thousand people starving to death every day, and more than a million Biafrans died in the war.

Biafra's failed secession is a trauma that has long been suppressed in Nigeria. There are writers, who have recently turned their attention to the decades-long silence over this dreadful civil war, authors such as Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie, both Igbo by birth, yet both having quite distinctly different views of Biafra.

Chinua Achebe is the grand old man of the African literature, which he *de facto* launched with his 1958 post-colonial classic novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe was actively committed to Biafran independence, and sometimes was its special ambassador. But he remained silent for forty years on the failed Igbo secession attempt, before he published his memoirs, shortly before his death in 2013: *There was a Country. A Personal History of Biafra*. Unlike his compatriot, the Nobel Prize-winner Wole Soyinka, who retrospectively described the attempted break-away as "*politically and militarily unwise*", Chinua Achebe describes the Biafran War in his memoirs as an inspiring moment of self-assertion for his Igbo people, in spite of the destitution and misery into which it plunged them. From that point on, he says, Nigeria totally squandered its meaningless and never properly developed independence, through the corruption and political incompetence of its rulers.

Chimamanda Adichie is two generations younger than Chinua Achebe: she was born in 1977 and she grew up in great awe of him. She calls him her model: reading *Things Fall Apart* was a life-changing revelation for her. She had lost both her grandfathers in the Biafran war; its dark shadow looms over her novels and short stories. In her 2006 novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the story of the impoverishment of the Igbo is told through twin sisters, members of the Igbo elite, who are drawn into that dehumanising war.

Adichie, then, deals with these events differently from Chinua Achebe. She has, of course, read Achebe's memoirs of the war: she delivered her conclusions on the book, its author and his generation in the *London Review of Books*. Given her lifelong admiration of Achebe, it is a sobering verdict: "*He is a member of Nigeria's generation of the bewildered, the people who were fortunate to be educated, who were taught to believe in Nigeria, and who watched, helpless and confused, as the country crumbled. He was a Biafran patriot, as were most of his Igbo colleagues, because they no longer felt they belonged in Nigeria. He still seems surprised, almost disbelieving, not only at the terrible things that happened but at the response, or lack of response, to them.*"

The Somali writer Nadifa Mohamed is four years younger than Chimamanda Adichie. At the age of five, she and her parents had to leave her birthplace, Hargeisa, flee the encroaching civil war and go into exile in England. Her novel about the civil war in Somalia, *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, deals with a period, which Nadifa Mohamed herself did not live through and which she doesn't therefore know from personal experience. She had to rely what she was told by her parents and relatives to find out about her country of birth. But this still gave her adequate scope to spin yarns and fantasies.

The novel takes place in 1987 and 1988, on the eve of the civil war, when Hargeisa fell into the hands of rebel separatist clans, whereupon the dictator Mohamed Siad

Barre bombed the town and the population fled in utter panic over the border into neighbouring Ethiopia.

The novel shows the emerging civil war from the standpoint of three women, the survival stories of three quite different and strikingly portrayed women, who represent three generations of their sex. There is an orphaned street girl, who refuses to allow herself to be brought up as a child prostitute and runs away. Then there's the young Somali soldier, who defects to the rebel cause. And finally the old widow, who creates a kind of patchwork-family with the other two: a wished-for grandmother with her pseudo-daughter and pseudo-niece.

All three protagonists are drawn into the bloody feud between the regime and their enemies, the insurgents from the clans. They experience for themselves how this civil conflict involving rebels, clan militias and government troops poisons national life and increasingly brutalises society. Men play hardly any role in the book and those that do are evil. Apart from beggars and tramps, there are few civilians left in Hargeisa: the men are either in the military or the police, or are insurgents on both sides of the Ethiopian border. Or else they are dead torture victims, thrown into the market-place by soldiers at night. Doctors are murdered out of hand if they protest about the foul conditions in their hospitals.

In the end, the dictator even has the town on Hargeisa bombed and the three women are left with the choice between death or flight. In order not to be killed by their own side, they decide to flee into neighbouring Ethiopia: better alive in a refugee camp than dead in their home town. The old widow sums up their dilemma: she *"can't understand anything in this country any more...policewomen have turned into torturers, vets into doctors, teachers into spies and children into armed rebels."*

Unlike the wars in Biafra and Somalia, the civil war in Uganda has hardly found any literary chronicler – with one interesting exception. In his recently published third novel, *All Our Names*, Dinaw Mengestu describes that short moment in time in the 1970s when, in the first flush of its newly-won independence, pan-African reform ideas blossomed in Uganda, before they were snuffed out by the civil war and the atrocities of Idi Amin's coup d'état and subsequent dictatorship.

The novel begins in quite playful style, in the turmoil of student protest actions on the Kampala University campus: however, this rebellious acting-up soon turns deadly earnest, as both the main characters in the novel, two would-be students, too poor to officially attend the university, gradually fall under the influence of insurgent militias, who have come together to resist Idi Amin's reign of terror. It's soon apparent that these rebel militias are no match for the violence of the regime. One of the students is soon so deeply involved in atrocities as to make flight impossible. He gives his friend his passport and student visa, so that he is able to escape to the USA under a false name.

The most unusual thing about this novel set in Uganda is its author: he is not Ugandan, but American, though born in Ethiopia, from where he emigrated from Addis Ababa with his parents at the age of two. It's clear that his own experience of dealing with mixed and blurred nationality was a good preparation for telling this dark

story of dubious nationality identities, which find in a civil war both their confirmation and their eradication.

In conclusion, I want to say that any excursion like this through contemporary non-European war literature, however cursory and sketchy it may be, cannot fail to mention Iraq. Iraq is a rich source of typical war stories, from its beginnings inside questionable frontiers negligently drawn by its Western occupiers, down to the present and the disastrous American invasion and their no less disastrous, overhasty withdrawal, leaving behind a ruined country, riven by civil strife.

Iraqi literature about this past and present failed state is extremely rich and impressive. As an example, I would like to mention just one book, the new novel by Najem Wali, *Baghdad Marlboro*.

Wali was born in Basra in 1956. In 1980, when the Iran-Iraq war broke out, he falsified his military service record, deserted and went to Germany. Today, he lives in Berlin, as a journalist and novelist. He writes his newspaper articles in German and his novels and short stories in Arabic.

The focus of his writing is Iraq's unhappy past and its ruined present. He makes clear how both an almost permanent state of conflict and external intervention have destroyed the country's once cosmopolitan urban culture and traumatised its people, morally and materially. He shows how the formerly multi-cultural diversity of Iraq – a country in which a mosaic of ethnicities and religions peacefully co-existed (Muslims, Jews, Kurds, Shabak, Chaldees, Yazidis and many more) – was destroyed, first through the expulsion of the Jews, of the Kurds and the Armenians and others by Sunni pan-Arab forces, and later by the interventions of the Americans and the Iranians and the growth of radical political Islam.

In his novel *Baghdad Marlboro*, Najem Wali's theme is the traumas of war inflicted on the Iraqi people: the past, in which there was no peace, the suppressed memories of the terrible violence, which are forever coming to the surface and cannot be forgotten.

In essence, the story is played out in 2004, in the second year of the country's occupation by US marines. Two dreadful events from the fighting in Kuwait are the key issues in the novel. The first of these war crimes was committed by the Iraqis, the second by the Americans. Iraqi soldiers massacred American prisoners-of-war, whom they were supposed to be guarding; and American forces bulldozed and buried alive an Iraqi battalion, which had dug in in the desert but which was going to surrender because they were dying of thirst.

These two war crimes have profoundly shaken both the main characters in the novel, who have neither ever killed before and have indeed lived lives that were peaceable, kind and ill-disposed to violence...Salman Mahdi, an Iraqi poet, and Daniel Brooks, an Afro-American lieutenant. Because each of them was a participant in these acts of violence, each is horrified by what he has done.

From its double perspective of both the Iraqi and American standpoints, Najem Wali's war novel strives to take an impartial view of the events in Iraq. This makes

the book unique and its author an important mediator between the Western and Arab worlds.

Modern, high-tech war, whose murderous violence is conducted on a computer-screen, is thus cloaked in a seemingly technical abstraction, but is nonetheless capable of being turned into literature. Writers like Najem Wali show that even such wars can make good stories, if they focus their attention and imaginative powers on the people behind the war machine.

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Yoram **Kaniuk**: *1948* (NYRB lit, 2012)

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On the Biafran War:

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