

Short Story 51: How I Lost the Second World War ...

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 23 Aug 2013

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6425>

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Marc Aramini — 23 Aug 2013, 20:20

“How I Lost the Second World War and Helped Turn Back the German Invasion” appeared in Analog in 1973 and is reprinted in Castle of Days on page 79.

SUMMARY: In a letter composed on April Fool’s Day 1938 to an unnamed magazine concerned with gaming and logic puzzles, an alternate history Dwight Eisenhower talks about the simulated game he and his friend Lansbury have been playing, “World War”. It mirrors the sides of our own World War II. He goes to an Exposition in Bath in England set up for Hitler to push his “people’s cars” — Volkswagens. Here, he runs into Herr Goering in the uniform of a flugzeugmeisterei (aircraft? master), and they discuss the possibility of “modern” war and how it would differ from the Great War with the current technology. Goering likes Dwight and sneaks him in more or less as a journalist to where Hitler will unveil his “people’s car” — the Volkswagen. He meets the journalist Churchill there. “After the introduction of the car and Churchill’s talk of the British urban car, the Centurion, Hitler challenges him to a race.” They cannot agree which side to drive on, so Churchill posits a race track that will have an urban side and a straight racing side, and that there will be mandatory parking along the way, with interference run by Japanese toy cars. When the track is constructed, of course Germany protests the use of professional drivers, and Eisenhower winds up driving in the race for England. England wins, and based on Churchill’s explanation later, it is because the track was a large transistor: the high saturation in the urban side of the track quickly dispersed to interfere with the flow of the German traffic, and by the time the English Centurions met the congestion point, the repulsion of the German side had also been pushing the traffic behind their progress to some degree (ie — it is easier to flow from an area of saturation to an area of emptiness than from an area of emptiness to saturation “against the current”). The final talk of Dwight’s simulated war does of course mention the cold war split between the Slavic nations and Russian and the United States. The story ends with the statement that their heavy smoking has damaged part of the map in Japan, and that both men are heavy smokers (thus the threat of further nuclear war in the Cold War era).

HISTORICAL MATCHES:

History seems to have followed a parallel course up to a certain point. The Great War and the

disaster of Gallapoli or Dardanelle has cost Winston Churchill his First Lord of the Admiralty position just as in our timeline, but the Graf Spee ship, named after the German hero, is a dirigible instead of a battlecruiser.??? In our story, Austria and Poland have been economically taken over by Germany (by 1938) because they own the bank through the success of their cars. Goering did make a preliminary visit to Poland to quell rumors of invasion in our historical 1938, and this invasion started on 1 Sept. 1939. (Economic takeover was actually quicker than hostile invasion). The elite sales force is known as the *sturmsachbearbeiter* here — a *sachbearbeiter* is an advisor or official in charge, and of course *sturm* is a storm. The story acknowledges Hitler's involvement in the creation of the autobahn (in our history he became involved in its support in 1933 with Fritz Todt). Interestingly enough it opened in 1935 and a high profile racing death in 1938 curtailed its usage in attempting road speed records.? ??This story culminates in a race in 1938, and thrives on the? pun that the German's insist their car is the "race master". Further puns involve the Japanese production of Toyotas, which they are pushing at Pearl Harbor at the end of the text, while Eisenhower goes to work with Buick.

Bath is the site of the exposition, but in the real world it would suffer several air raids in 1942. Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was exiled from 1936 to 1940, and stayed at Fairfield House in Bath — there seems to be no mention of him in the story, yet our exposition building has definitely been altered by German engineering.

The dates that Lansbury and Dwight divvy up the sides by chance (February 17th, 1938) seem to have no historical significance, though in 1944 February 17th is the date of a victory for America in the war. Similarly, the date that he reads of the exposition, February 20th, also seems to have no significance, save that again in 1944 it is the start of the "Big Week" for America in raiding German facilities. Was there really a 7 mile hippodrome and a dirigible tower in Bath? I don't think so - this is another area in which buildings and technology diverge thanks to German economic interference.

COMMENTARY:

There are no glaring elisions or plot holes. This is more of a fun story than anything else, but there are plenty of little historical Easter Eggs scattered throughout it. The idea of Eisenhower and Goering talking about war strategy over Bavarian creams, and perceiving each other as kindred spirits, is very interesting. ??Eisenhower then employs the blitzkrieg strategy he learns from Goering in his simulated war game with Lansbury. At the inception of the text, Dwight Eisenhower writes a letter on April Fool's day to a magazine devoted to some kind of strategy/ Game theory (though game theory would probably be a slight anachronism in 1938). The basis of their World War is one that involves strategy, invention, and rhetoric to convince their opponent that whatever advance they want is feasible. The story does at least one thing very strange: it reduces our reality to a small 4 by 6 board game and it actually increases a transistor to the size of a giant race track (even though there ARE some super small cars on it). This shift in scale/reality is actually pretty interesting, and I feel it is a comment to

some degree on the smallest things having world altering impacts (the model cars are the reason the real cars can't park — they run signal interference, and splitting/fusing an atom creates such a powerfully massive force that the world trembles). Thus in this story, the shift in scale is a very real theme and microcosmic events are ultimately "maximized". Goering, reenacting the powerful bomb of a Stutzkampfbomber (a bomber used for battle employing a steep sloping attack?), simulates it with a Bavarian Cream that hits Dwight's shoe. Game theory deals with strategic decisions, not only in battle, but in economics, and I feel Wolfe is here definitely equating the two as effective means of domination: military and economic force; the theme is that all simulation ultimately comes back to a valid means to control (thus economic takeovers are ultimately the same as war, on a simulated or even "smaller" level).

Another irony of course is that the toy Japanese cars are flitting around at the beginning of the exposition trumpeting "the virtues of that industrious nation's produce, particularly the gramophones, wirelasses, and so on, employing those recently invented wonders, ?transistors?" (82). Much like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor waking America from its complacency on the international scene, this toy trumpeting of transistors presages the downfall of the economic invasion: Churchill will turn the racetrack into a giant transistor (another pun is that the common construction of transistors involves Germanium). "This irony is of course also reflected in the background of Dwight Eisenhower: a German American fighting against Germany." In the game, he also has control of Germany and the Axis powers. This almost seems like the old trope of apotropaic magic to some degree: if you want to defeat something, you have to use its nature against itself (thus Othello leading the Venetian army against the Turks, or convicted hackers getting amnesty working for the government on security systems). Ultimately the simulation screams: little things can have big consequences.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is Lansbury the historical George Lansbury, who visited all the heads of state during WWII suing for peace?

The Bath exposition mentioned in the text — is this similar to the Paris Expositions of 1937/38 and a kind of transplantation from art to technology, or completely unrelated? From the description of several structures as created by the makers of

the autobahn, it seems this is unique to Wolfe's fictional universe as a result of the widespread German industrialization and economic invasion.

Where exactly did history diverge? One event in particular that we can pinpoint through detail, or just in the direction of Germany immediately after the Great War, (as they have already established economic footholds in countries where, in our reality, they established military strength)? I would assume this diverges immediately following the Great War, with the focus of German obsession latching onto industry.

RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER WORKS: Wolfe's alternate history works are actually pretty scarce, insofar as they deal with real world contemporary events. The war seems to have a special place in his heart, as many of the planes and weapons of the World Wars will come up over and over again (Against the Lafayette Escadrille, The Last Casualty of Cambrai). Certainly one

might read this and “Donovan Sent Us” as flip sides of a coin — Churchill shows up in both, but this perhaps has the more flattering presentation. ??Contemporary alternative history is actually very scant and scarce in Wolfe’s work, though mythic reworkings are practically omnipresent (The Lost Pilgrim, The Death of Koschei the Deathless, etc). Far more importantly is the creation of microcosmic representations that are somehow still real: the war game follows our reality, and the threat of nuclear war is equated with Dwight’s smoking tendencies. The life size transistor shoves home the idea that scientific knowledge is how one can overcome all kinds of obstacles, even when the science doesn’t seem particularly applicable. I think this is at the heart of larger mysteries in Wolfe as well, like Short Sun (vegetable hybridization) and The Fifth Head of Cerberus (larval lifecycles and engineering approximation techniques) — the science becomes a metaphor that actually helps understand the action. ??I feel this is to some degree the way Wolfe’s symbols work as well — representation is a little bit closer to reality than it first seems: “things weaker than our words for them” (from Chapter 1 of Shadow of the Torturer)

Marc Aramini — 23 Aug 2013, 20:24 · follows Marc Aramini

As far as I can see the only two changes before the story starts are that Germany focused on economics instead of military might after the Great War, and that Churchill's career never got over the disasters from that war and he returned to journalism.

Mo Holkar — 24 Aug 2013, 09:50 · in reply to Marc Aramini

At 21:20 23/08/2013, you wrote:

The Bath exposition mentioned in the text — is this similar to the Paris Expositiions of 1937/38 and a kind of transplantation from art to technology, or completely unrelated?

I have wondered 'why Bath?' In real life it's a smallish antiquated town, with no industrial tradition, and not at all a likely candidate for the hosting of such an exposition. Yet, being Wolfe, one feels there must be some reason why he chose it.

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

Marc Aramini — 24 Aug 2013, 13:59 · in reply to Mo Holkar

The only significance it had in ww2 as far as I could see was that Ethiopian ruler in exile there and the heavy damage it suffered, but I have absolutely no knowledge of the banking-commerce-loan infrastructure of England around that time at all. Good question.

Sent from my iPhone

On Aug 24, 2013, at 2:50 AM, Mo Holkar <lists at ukg.co.uk> wrote:
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Jeff Wilson — 24 Aug 2013, 18:25 · in reply to Mo Holkar

On Sat, August 24, 2013 04:50, Mo Holkar wrote:
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Perhaps a front of misdirection on the part UK, parallel to their assembly of scale factory mockups to draw Axis bombing attacks away from actual factories during the war.

Jeff Wilson - <jwilson at clueland.com >
A&M Texarkana Computational Intelligence Lab
< <http://www.tamut.edu/cil> >

Tony Ellis — 24 Aug 2013, 19:17 · follows Jeff Wilson

From: Mo Holkar

I have wondered 'why Bath?' In real life it's a smallish antiquated town, with no industrial tradition, and not at all a likely candidate for the hosting of such an exposition. Yet, being Wolfe, one feels there must be some reason why he chose it.

Wolfe says in Castle of Days that his mother's family was from there, and that he's always wanted to see the place. (From a Letter to Nancy Kress)

Also, once you've dismissed London for being too obvious, it's a very good choice for an exposition. It's an historic town, rather than an antiquated one, in the heart of England, with a longstanding tradition of high culture, leisure and tourism.