

Grounded

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Figure 3. *Bunker Entrance, Altes Lager, 10.4.03.*

As a source for all of the images under discussion, please visit: {www.angus-boulton.net}.

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Grounded

TARAK BARKAWI*

Every year Berlin and its environs yield a thousand or so corpses from 1945, soldiers from the ferocious fighting on the Seelow Heights, in the city, and among the stands of pine to the south.¹ '[I]n a place like Berlin and its hinterland, where the marks of the history of twentieth-century violence are evident to anyone who has eyes to see, myths of progress lose all their credibility.'² Angus Boulton's photos are from another war, a so-called Cold War. The remains of bodies emerging from the ground and the haunting buildings decaying in Boulton's images serve as reminders that international relations, such as those termed 'war', happen *somewhere*, and that in happening they remake (and unmake) places and people. Yet theories of IR are curiously groundless, composed of concepts pitched into abstract space. Where exactly are we to *find* 'anarchy' or the 'security dilemma', for

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¹ Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945* (Viking: London, 2002), p. 431.

² Hans Joas, *War and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 11.

example, much less 'the international system' or even the 'Cold War'. This abstraction seeps from the rusted iron and broken floorboards of these Cold War installations, figures of something called deterrence, or the balance of forces in Europe. These concepts, or similar ones, participated in placing soldiers *there* in those spaces and buildings and others like them. It is worth reflecting for a moment on the curious relations between theory, practice, and the *ground* they remake in these two very different sorts of war layered in the earth around Berlin.

The intimacy with which soldiers know their ground is perhaps unrivalled. Construction crews, or lovers picnicking in a forest, happen upon the remains of men at one with the soil into which they bled out, clutching the muck in their death throes. These same men dug bunkers, weapons pits, trenches, and laid wire; dirt and sweat, soil and blood, not as nationalist metaphor but as gritty experience. Their implements of war transformed the landscape, from rolling barrages to tank treads, from air strikes to mine fields. And the landscape remembered. The bustle of a rebuilt city does not hide the neat arc of 20mm rounds that peppered a church or block of flats in some forgotten engagement, nor does a verdant carpet, lolling over old shell holes, veil what happened there, bodies torn and pierced, sinking into broken ground, returning metal and flesh to earth.

This one war, the Second World War, the 'good war' for American popular culture as for liberal international relations thinking, seems so real and vital to us, its traces everywhere; that other war, the Cold War, ethereal, not really a war at all. It's not just that Boulton captures 'ghost' installations, in the sense of no longer in use, ruins, but that even in their active lives they were only for show, for demonstration effect in a war that, seemingly, was not fought *anywhere*.

The route to abstraction, where we scholars live, is evident already among officers surveying ground on which they intend to fight. They interpret it in terms of lines of sight, reverse slopes, and fields of fire. Their calling requires translating sensuous experience into a theoretic system, an opaque shroud laid over the ground, where they see, for example, a contour line from a map rather than the irregular rise of a hill. Theory and its concepts *necessitate* taking as prior, as more real, some abstract system rather than that which is evident to the senses. Only then can abstractions come to guide thought and action, for infantry officers as for scholars, statespersons and their advisors.

So it is that in war, as in other dimensions of international relations, theory and practice remake the world and leave traces on the ground. Some years later, on that same ground that the Red Army and the *Wehrmacht* conducted their final vicious duel, ceaseless training for a war never fought – at least in Europe – would transform the ground once again, leaving behind these ghostly installations. For some, those images may evoke nostalgia, for a time when battle lines were clearly drawn, for a time when there were clear targets – like that Soviet bunker – even if they were only ever struck virtually in war games that happened elsewhere. Longing for simpler times is evident too in the discourse of IR, where the world and its histories are carved up in anodyne concepts like 'Cold War'. But Boulton's images remind us that this Cold War *happened*, and that it happened *somewhere*. But where? Was it on the inter-German border? On firing ranges used by Group Soviet Forces Germany or the *Nationale Volksarmee* (NPA)?³ Or did it occur there, on that

³ National People's Army, the armed forces of the German Democratic Republic.

basketball court? The image of the Cold War in IR achieves an effortless clarity by obfuscating that which it refers to; Boulton's images disrupt this clarity and force a confrontation with the concrete histories we elide and evade in naming the conflict 'cold', the very histories which required an act of naming in the first place.

Walter Lippmann's oxymoronic label for an era was relentlessly Eurocentric, for just about the only places the conflict could be considered 'cold' were in Europe and the homelands of the superpowers. Everywhere else was on the boil, tens of millions perished violently, people and places unmade and made over by force. Death squads roamed through villages and universities, priests and advocates for the poor holed with twelve-gauge shot. Elsewhere they were thrown into the sea from helicopters, while others were tortured and the people massacred with advice and support. The United States Air Force unleashed its murderous flocks on Asian peasantries, cooking them with napalm, blasting them with high explosive, strafing them with cannon, and contaminating their unborn children and their lands with Agent Orange. Out at sea, great ships of war – one of them today resting gently on the Thames, a tourist attraction – hammered those same peasants with their big guns. Back in Boulton's installations, Red Army officers and other ranks returned from Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Ethiopia, Egypt, Mozambique or Afghanistan, among other hot places, to enjoy a 'peacetime' garrison posting, while the many veterans of the *Wehrmacht* serving in the NPA would have had few illusions about the differences between hot and cold wars. Some of them fought on the Seelow heights, counting as comrades those in the ground around Berlin. Meanwhile, even where the guns stayed silent, in homelands East and West, waves of persecution surged through families and societies, shaping politics, ruining livelihoods and confining bodies and minds.

That nostalgia those of us of certain generations may feel for those times is an *abomination*, an abomination reproduced every instance – and there are so many – in which that term 'Cold War' is used, rolling off our lips in lecture theatres or tapped out on keyboards as here. The term conjures a war that *didn't* happen, not the many that happened under its auspices. A war that didn't happen also didn't happen anywhere in particular. If it is to be located anywhere, it is found in our textbooks, in archives of state, and in the minds of nuclear strategists and other advisors to the prince. Such abstraction regularly refracts our vision from *where* the Cold War happened, and to *whom* it happened.

Here, photographs inspired words intended to evoke images, provoking the question of IR's abstractions in relation to the concrete experiences and histories that make up the world it seeks to comprehend. These abstractions participate in the making of international relations, of that concrete experience so destructive for peoples and places.