

The First Two Pages: *The Good Cop*
by Peter Steiner (Severn House)

What do people do when the law goes bad, when obeying the law becomes indefensible and violating the law places your life in danger? My new novel, *The Good Cop*, is about the moral decline of Germany after the First World War. I decided to start the novel on the last day of the War itself.

The first sentence is short, but it tells us a lot about one of the book's main characters and the bizarre landscape in which he finds himself. I wanted to establish the historical facts of the moment. And at the same time, I wanted to set a tone that would help establish the veracity of the story, to give it persuasive heft, the feeling of a true piece of history, since the question of how does one live under tyranny—the overall theme of the book—is still an important question a century later.

THE ARGONNE, NOVEMBER 11, 1918

Sergeant Maximilian Wolf of the Sixteenth Royal Bavarian Infantry lost almost his entire squad the last morning of the war. It was announced the fighting would end at eleven o'clock. All they had to do was wait, keep their heads down and it would be over. The trouble was the Americans had lost a lot of men crossing the Meuse, and General Pershing kept attacking. He was going to teach the Germans a lesson. Mortars rained down on them in the trenches. And when that happened, the captain ordered them over the top.

The chapter heading reads like the dateline in a newspaper, and the first sentence is the lead—informative, dramatic, but factual, objective. The tone

suggests we are dealing with facts, not fiction. We are reading history. Except now we are seeing that history through the eyes of a defeated German soldier.

Some of the men—schoolboys, really—had arrived the day before in clean uniforms. They didn't have fleas or lice or rotting feet. They had terror in their eyes. They lit cigarettes with shaking hands. Now they were dead.

Levi Adler, Maximilian's friend, was dead too. Maximilian and Levi had fought side by side for four years—first against the French and now against the Americans. Levi was dead and Maximilian was alive, and Maximilian couldn't say which of them was the lucky one.

Though he is not the narrator, it is clear we are seeing things from Maximilian's point of view. He has been at war for four years. But that doesn't make the setting any less grotesque to him than it is to us. The obliteration of innocents moves him and us, which helps establish our connection to him. His cynicism is in plain view, and so is his pain.

Adolf Hitler was in the First World War and suffered through some of the same horrors, but to a decidedly different effect. The war shaped and sharpened his rage and his nihilism. Maximilian's friend Levi Adler, a Jew, who once saved Maximilian's life, couldn't exist, even as a fact, in the world that Hitler set out to build.

Now it was over. Maximilian sat on the edge of the trench and ate his ration of black bread and sausage. He drank deeply from his canteen. The water was warm and smelled of sulfur. He smoked a cigarette. He took a small notebook from his chest pocket and opened it to the drawing of Levi he had made days earlier. The eyes were wild and full of life. He turned to a blank page, rested his helmet on his lap

and the notebook on his helmet and began to draw what he saw across the battlefield.

“Now it was over.” The end is anticlimactic. In a moment like this, that which is not destructive or despairing can be seen as hopeful. The eating, drinking, smoking may be mundane acts, but they are basic and nurturing and thus look toward some sort of future, something that did not seem to exist just hours ago when it was raining mortar shells. Sensual details—the sausage and bread, even the stench and taste of the warm water—take the reader further into Maximilian’s experience and into the moment better than mere physical description could. Eating and smoking on the edge of the trench is almost a celebration. It means the war really is over.

Soldiers from both sides climbed out of the trenches, tentatively at first, but then more confidently. There were a few cheers on both sides as the truth of the Armistice sank in, but most of the men walked around in silence. A crow was cawing somewhere. American and then German soldiers picked their way across the mud to find anyone still alive. The air smelled of ordnance and blood and shit.

It is too soon for celebration. The stupor that has come with four years of horror threatens to overpower glimmers of life and hope. So the men are mostly silent. There is birdsong. But it is a crow. There is still the stench of death all around them.

During his four years in combat, Maximilian had been seriously wounded twice, not counting the gassings. Once, early on, a piece of shrapnel had torn open his cheek and temple just behind his eye. A year later, white phosphorus had burned his entire back into scar

tissue and taken him out of action for three months. His back still looked like a slab of meat, white and gristly with ropey purple and crimson stripes, it never stopped hurting.

“Here’s Hagen,” someone shouted. Maximilian nodded to show he had heard. Hagen was one of the new ones. Maximilian couldn’t remember what he looked like. It didn’t matter. He didn’t look like anyone now.

Maximilian took the Iron Cross from his chest. The captain had always ordered anyone with decorations to wear them. “For the Fatherland,” he had said. Maximilian dropped the medal where he had dropped his cigarette and ground them both into the mud with his heel. He went to help bury Hagen or what was left of him.

Maximilian’s wounds are grievous, grotesque, and painful. “Not counting the gassings” suggests that the world's suffering is vast and endless, hardly worth mentioning. Maximilian’s thoughts about Hagen the dead soldier—that he didn’t know what Hagen looked like, and that it didn’t matter—are one more expression of the fatigue he feels. But he throws his medal in the mud—denying his heroism in the moment when we learn of it. This is a ferocious rejection of the nationalist fervor that had led to the just finished First World War and would soon lead to the rise of the Third Reich and the Second World War with its and sixty million dead. This moment of opposition to mindless patriotism is the moment where I staked out the restricted and difficult space where I think morality and virtue exist in *The Good Cop*.

At this point, even though I knew the subject matter I wanted to deal with, I did not know how the story would take me there. Maximilian remains a main character, and he engages in that struggle. But about twenty pages into the story I

met Willi Geismeier, a Munich police detective, and it almost immediately became apparent that Willi's struggle to remain good would be the essential struggle in the book.

I like to think that this shift in the story was history's doing more than it was mine. As Hitler gained power, German society allowed itself to be corrupted. It surrendered to fear and malevolence, and gradually became discriminatory, then unjust, then tyrannical without recognizing the costs. And the criminal justice system—the police and the judiciary, already inclined toward authoritarianism—began smoothing the way for Hitler's rise, condoning his illegal behavior. Big business, the military, and the press were also often complicit, for their own reasons. But the law and its corruption paved Hitler's road to power.

Everyone under Germany's control soon found himself having to choose. And Willi, as a policeman, has the choice in spades. Will he go along with the prevailing abuses—large and small—and prosper? Or will he act against these abuses and suffer the grievous consequences? Keeping his head down and staying out of trouble was not an option. Not for Willi or Maximilian or anyone else. You could be sent to a concentration camp for making fun of Hitler. *And* you could be sent to a concentration camp for *not* turning that person in.

On the second page, the day after the war ended, Maximilian, marching in a column of Germans, begins the long journey home.

A skinny dog came out of nowhere. It ran up to one man after another until someone dug into his pocket and gave the dog a piece of dry biscuit. The dog ran with them then. Someone else gave it a scrap of food. It ran up to Maximilian. He reached down and patted the starving animal on its trembling ribs. Maximilian found a piece of sausage in his kit and fed it to the dog. The dog licked his fingers. And as it did, Maximilian felt tears well in his eyes. *Thank God, thought Maximilian. I'm still in here somewhere.*

That tentative bit of humanity was everything. But not enough.

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Peter Steiner is the author of the critically acclaimed Louis Morgon series of crime novels. He is also a cartoonist for *The New Yorker* and is the creator of one of the most famous cartoons of the technological age, which prompted the adage, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.'