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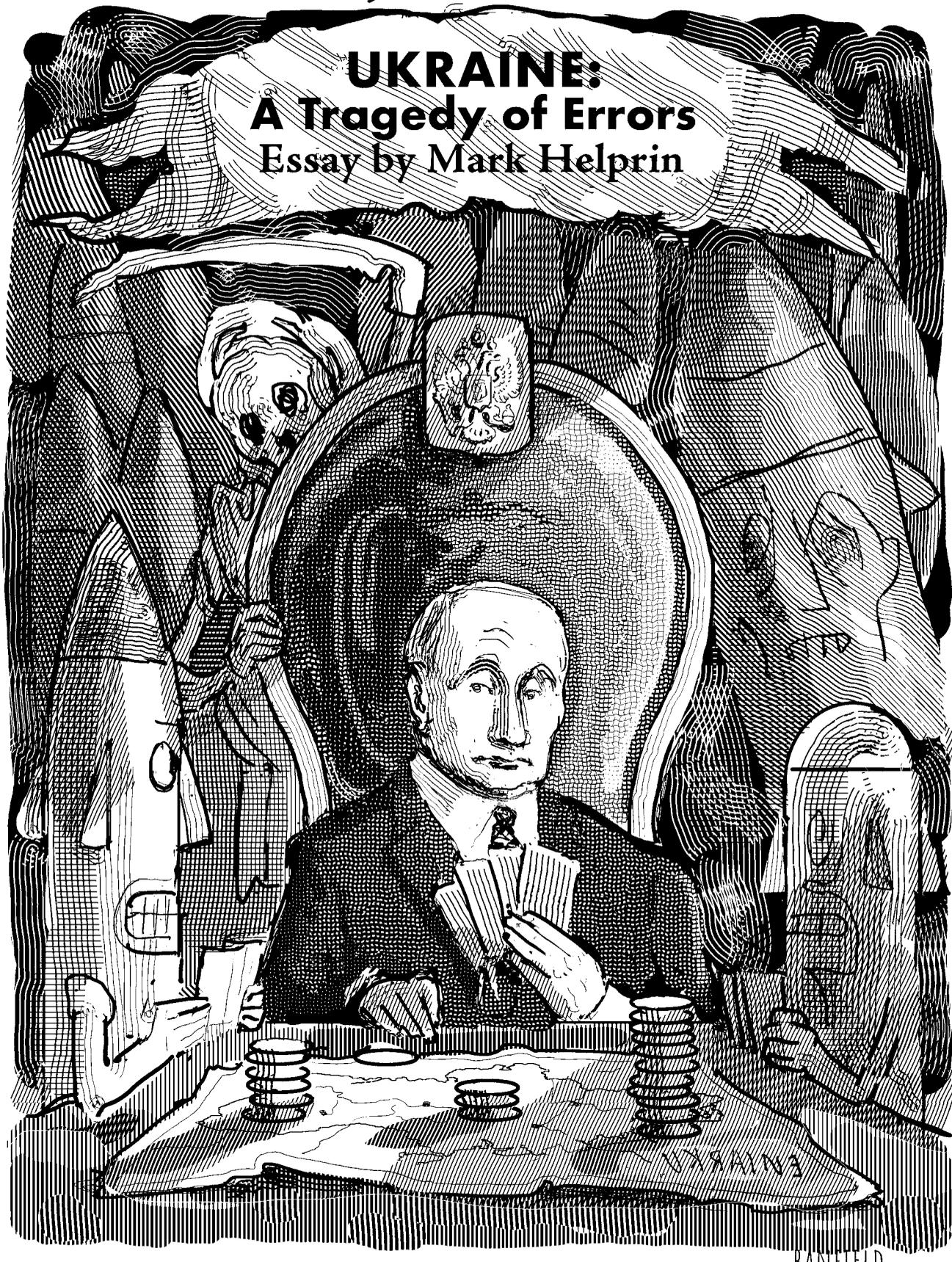
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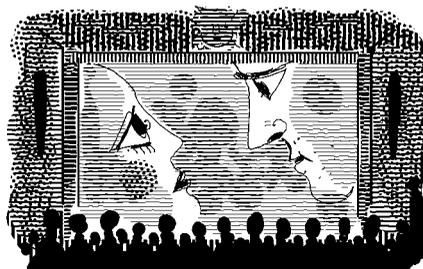
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SHADOW PLAY
by Martha Bayles



A Whiff of Munich

FROM A MARKETING POINT OF VIEW, early 2022 was an auspicious time for Netflix to start streaming *Munich: The Edge of War*. Based on a novel by popular British author Robert Harris, and directed by German filmmaker Christian Schwochow, the film focuses on the period just before the signing of the infamous Munich Agreement of September 1938, and ends shortly after it. At the time of its release, Russian troops were massing on the border with Ukraine, and Western pundits were buzzing with speculation about how best to fend off an invasion without unnecessarily provoking Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The historical analogy was obvious even before British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace warned in the *Sunday Times* about a “whiff of Munich in the air.” Many Western supporters of Ukrainian independence and freedom wondered whether their leaders would turn out to be appeasers like Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister responsible for the Munich Agreement, or resisters like Winston Churchill, Chamberlain’s great antagonist.

It was in Munich, the birthplace of National Socialism, that the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy agreed to let Adolf Hitler seize the Czech border region known as the Sudetenland. Home to a large population of ethnic Germans, as well as Czechoslovakia’s main munitions plants and defensive fortifications, the Sudetenland was quite a prize for Hitler, considering that all he gave in return was an empty promise that his ambition would extend no further.

A lot of people wanted to believe Hitler. Indeed, when Chamberlain returned to London and announced that he had achieved “peace for our time,” he was greeted by cheering crowds and a public show of gratitude by

King George VI and Queen Consort Elizabeth. As the tributes piled up, the topper came from Chamberlain’s predecessor, Lord Stanley Baldwin, who intoned, “It was just as though the finger of God had drawn the rainbow once more across the sky and ratified again His Covenant with the children of men.”

Discussed in this essay:

Munich: The Edge of War,
directed by Christian Schwochow.
Screenplay by Ben Power. Netflix

The skunk at this garden party was Churchill. In October 1938, as the House of Commons was gearing up to ratify the Agreement, Churchill delivered a passionate 45-minute speech that, among other things, rebuked the signatories for their unforgivable treatment of the Czech delegation, who were present in Munich but confined to their hotel room while their country’s fate was being decided. For Czechoslovakia, Churchill declared, “All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, [she] recedes into the darkness. She has suffered in every respect by her association with the Western democracies.”

Historians and Storytellers

UKRAINE HAS NOT SUFFERED THE same fate. In early April, when the foul evidence of Russian atrocities in the city of Bucha first appeared, the eminent British historian Andrew Roberts published an essay in the *Wall Street Journal* crediting Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky with having “summoned his inner Churchill.”

As I write this a month later, Roberts’s words still apply:

Like Churchill, Mr. Zelensky endures nightly attacks on his capital city for weeks on end, speaks to his people without ever sugaring the pill, appeals for the tools to finish the job, and, in a direct paraphrase of Churchill’s June 4, 1940, speech after Dunkirk, has promised to fight in the forests and the streets and not to surrender.

This comparison is high praise, coming from Roberts, whose many books include the widely acclaimed biography, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (2018). But it may also be incautious, because with the conflict still raging, no one can say whether Zelensky will prove as effective against Putin as Churchill was against Hitler. We can only hope and pray for such an outcome. But we live in a scary time, and history does not always rhyme with the stories we like to tell ourselves.

That Roberts is a meticulous scholar is evident from the endnotes in *Walking with Destiny*, which despite being greatly abbreviated and in the tiniest possible font, run margin to margin for a full 35 pages. This amount of detail might prove tedious in another writer, but Roberts is also a good storyteller—and to judge by his public persona, mindful of how a well told story can shape public consciousness. Perhaps his praise of Zelensky was meant to inspire as much as inform.

Yet there is a danger here. When history is turned into storytelling, and storytelling is used to inspire action, the obdurate truth of events can get taken over by propaganda. With regard to Ukraine, this is exactly what Putin has been doing for years. Anna Reid

is the author of *Borderland* (1997), a highly esteemed history of Ukraine. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* recently, she offered this lucid analysis:

In July 2021, well before the buildup of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, the Kremlin published a 7,000-word essay under Putin's byline with the title "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Both Russia and Ukraine, it asserted, have not only common roots in language and faith but also a shared historic destiny.... As the extraordinary resilience and unity of the Ukrainian population in the current war have demonstrated,... Putin's imagined Ukraine has increasingly diverged from Ukrainian reality.... But rather than adjusting his historical fantasy to bring it closer to the truth, Putin has doubled down, resorting to military force and totalitarian censorship.

The point is quite simple: historians and biographers should endeavor to tell good stories, but there is a fundamental difference between these disciplines and the age-old art of storytelling. Storytellers from Scheherazade to Shakespeare have always felt free to compress, simplify, and rearrange historical facts, as well as to invent new ones, for the sake of a compelling plot. They can do that because they are working in the realm of fiction.

But what about "historical fiction"? Is the term an oxymoron, or is there some way to reconcile the priorities of the researcher with those of the raconteur? There is, I believe. But it is tricky, because to find it we must focus less on *whether* the facts are being altered than on *how*—and *why*.

I'm not sure where he finds the time, but Roberts enjoys weighing in on popular films about historical figures whose lives he has chronicled. For example, in 2018 he wrote a piece for the *Spectator* ranking the performances of the 35 actors who have played Churchill in films, and the 28 who have done so on television. He gave top marks to Robert Hardy, star of the 1981 TV series *The Wilderness Years*. But he also had kudos for Albert Finney, for his memorable performance in *The Gathering Storm* (2002); Brendan Gleeson, for his brilliant portrayal in *Into the Storm* (2009); and Gary Oldman, for reminding us in *Darkest Hour* (2017) that even in his dotage, Churchill could have run circles around the Energizer Bunny.

To watch these superb films in succession is to marvel at the liberties each one takes

with the historical record. Not all of these liberties succeed. For example, *The Wilderness Years* is unduly biased, with Churchill lionized at every turn, and his political opponents caricatured as dunces, closet Nazis, or both. *Darkest Hour* invents a scene in which Churchill takes a late-night ride on the London Underground as a way to gauge the British public's fighting spirit. There is no record of such an incident, but even if there were, the film strains credulity by turning it into a stagey set piece that borders on propaganda. If Roberts noticed these faults, he does not mention them. Perhaps this is because his priority is to encourage popular storytellers to keep Churchill's memory alive as an example to future generations.

Unfortunately, this priority seems to have blinded Roberts to the merits of *Munich: The Edge of War*. In a scathing review for the *Washington Free Beacon*, he called it "an absolute historical travesty" based on a story by a novelist, Harris, who "since the 1980s...has been trying to rehabilitate the reputation of Neville Chamberlain." Worse, Roberts accused the filmmakers of being so eager to present Chamberlain "as a modest man who was not in the least taken in by Hitler" that they airbrushed out the gravity of the situation leading up to Munich, and the horrific consequences that followed.

I don't blame anyone who, after reading Roberts's review, decides not to watch the film. The world is already choking on "narratives" that distort history for the sake of grinding some axe or other. Who needs another, especially from Netflix? But it is not clear who is grinding the axe here. Most of Roberts's criticisms are of minor changes in the historical record, similar to the artistic liberties taken by the Churchill films he so admires.

A Riveting Tale

PERSONALLY, I SAW *MUNICH: THE EDGE OF WAR* before reading Roberts's review, and I was taken aback by the review's harshness. My first thought was that Roberts disliked the film because it makes no reference, not even a passing one, to Churchill. But I confess to not having noticed the omission while watching this riveting tale about two fictional friends, a young Briton named Hugh Legat (George MacKay) and a young German named Paul von Hartmann (Jannis Niewöhner), who get drawn into a conspiracy to stop Hitler before he can take the first step into the Sudetenland.

The film opens with a flashback to spring 1932, when Hugh, Paul, and Lena, Paul's Jewish girlfriend, are celebrating their undergrad-

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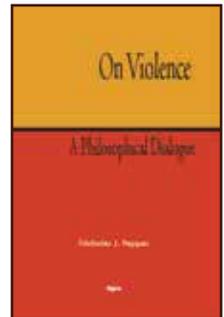
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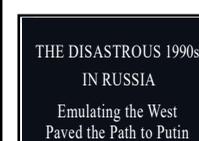
Violence and reason are related, if only because violence is done to reason every single day. All it takes is to fail to listen. Everything else, all the real violence, starts right there, including tough talk in lieu of rational argument and the violence of not allowing us to think things through.

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No wonder the public was ready for a strong, smart, energetic leader to set a new direction... and so we have Putin.

DEMIAN: THE STORY OF EMIL SINCLAIR'S YOUTH

Hermann Hesse

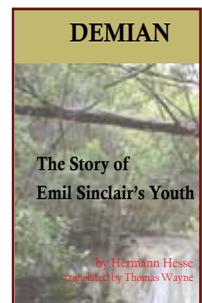
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uate degree ceremony at Oxford. In a subsequent flashback we see the threesome divided by Paul's enthusiasm for the "New Germany" under National Socialism.

By September 1938, Hugh and Paul are both working for their respective governments, but Paul is no longer a Nazi enthusiast. On the contrary, he has joined a conspiracy of elite military officers planning to arrest Hitler the moment he orders troops into the Sudetenland. When Paul steals a document revealing Hitler's plan to conquer all of Europe, British intelligence ferrets out his connection to Hugh, currently an aide to Chamberlain, and enlists Hugh to accompany the prime minister to the meeting in Munich, and receive the document from Paul.

The Munich scenes are gripping, in part because the producers did not use a substitute location for the building where the Agreement was signed. Instead, they filmed the exterior shots at the Führerbau, the massive colonnaded edifice that today houses a music school but in the 1930s was Hitler's Munich headquarters. To anyone familiar with the Führerbau, it is chilling to see it once again festooned with Nazi banners, and to find the bronze eagles above its two grand entrances (digitally) restored.

As the negotiations over the Agreement near their close, Hugh and Paul risk life and career to persuade Chamberlain not to sign it. Having run out of alternatives, Hugh smuggles Paul into Chamberlain's hotel suite, where he shows the stolen document to the prime minister (who does not read German) and tries to explain why signing the Agreement would be self-defeating.

Paul's logic is tricky but sound: there exists a credible conspiracy to stop Hitler, but the tripwire to set it in motion is Hitler seizing the Sudetenland by force and in violation of certain treaty obligations between Czechoslovakia and the Western powers. Such an act would give the conspirators the pretext they need to arrest Hitler. But if the Agreement is signed, effectively giving Hitler carte blanche, then that pretext will disappear and the conspirators will likely lose heart.

But Chamberlain is not persuaded, and our young heroes are left with the tragic irony so aptly summarized by Churchill: "You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war."

How accurate is this story? According to the novelist, Harris, the character of Hugh is invented, but Paul is based loosely on Adam von Trott zu Solz, a German diplomat and scion of an aristocratic Hessian family, who six years later would join the July 1944 assassination plot led by Claus von Stauffenberg. When

that 1944 plot misfired, von Trott and his fellow conspirators were hanged—and 5,000 other people were murdered in reprisals, most of whom had little or no connection to the plot.

As for the conspiracy joined by Paul, it is based on the Oster Conspiracy, a 1938 plot led by Hans Oster, deputy head of the German intelligence service, and a number of other high-ranking military officers and aristocratic anti-Nazis intent upon restoring the Prussian monarchy.

Paul's stolen document is also based on fact. There is no record of such a document changing hands at Munich, but a similar document, the Hossbach Memorandum, was introduced as evidence at the Nuremberg Trials. The veracity of that document (said to be notes from a 1937 meeting of Hitler's inner circle) has been disputed by historians. But there is no dispute that, three months before Munich, another aristocratic anti-Nazi, Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin, visited Churchill and confided "that at least half of the Wehrmacht High Command 'were convinced that an attack on Czechoslovakia would involve Germany in war with France and Britain and that Germany could not last three months.'"

I could go on, but my purpose is merely to suggest that this film is not "an absolute historical travesty" but rather a fair example of historical fiction. If the real men and women depicted in this film were still alive, the lawyers for the producers, Netflix and Turbine Studios, would probably have posted the familiar disclaimer: "This story is based on actual events. In certain cases incidents, characters and timelines have been changed for dramatic purposes." But who is going to sue the producers now? Not Andrew Roberts, I hope.

Memo to Netflix: Cut the Epilogue

ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER Chamberlain was the hero of the real-life meeting in Munich, Roberts is right. He was not. And neither are those who today advocate giving the Donbas to Putin in exchange for a promise that his ambition will extend no further. If the reader needs a second opinion on Chamberlain, I recommend his French counterpart at Munich, Prime Minister Édouard Daladier. A veteran of the trench warfare that 20 years earlier had killed 1.3 million French soldiers, Daladier was willing to support almost any attempt to preserve peace. Yet he had no illusions about Hitler. At the time, France was bound by a treaty promising to defend Czechoslovakia. But that obligation could not be met without British support, and



Chamberlain, whom Daladier called “a desiccated stick,” refused to give it. In the end, Daladier signed the Agreement. But it is telling that, when Daladier was met with cheering crowds back in Paris, he remarked to a close aide, “*Ah! les cons! s’ils savaient*” (“Ah! The fools! If only they knew”).

With regard to *Munich: The Edge of War*, the bottom line is that it does not depict Chamberlain as a hero. There are hints of his sincerity, as when he gets Hitler to sign a separate “Anglo-German Declaration” stating “the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.” But most of those hints come from Jeremy Irons, in a subtle and remarkable performance that captures not just the prime minister’s desire to prevent a war more ghastly than the last, but also his personal vanity and naïveté in believing he alone could charm Hitler. In this sense, the character of Chamberlain is part of the suspense.

It may be that, for Roberts, the real problem is not with the film itself but with the epilogue that appears on the screen after the last scene has faded. In the sober block lettering we have come to expect from such pronouncements, it reads:

The peace between Britain and Germany lasted just a year. Under heavy criti-

cism, Neville Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister and died a few months later. The extra time bought by the Munich Agreement enabled Britain and her allies to prepare for war and ultimately led to Germany’s defeat.

Were it not for this epilogue, I would never have imagined the film’s message is to redeem the reputation of Neville Chamberlain. The concluding scenes are not redemptive at all. Rather they are full of foreboding: Paul taking Hugh to a hidden asylum where his Jewish girlfriend Lena is in a vegetative state after being tortured by stormtroopers; Hugh telling his wife that he is thinking of joining the RAF, because “one day soon we will have to fight”; Paul being warned by Helen, his co-conspirator and lover, that “They will hang you for that one day,” and replying simply, “I know.”

This epilogue gets so many things wrong, it would take a lengthy treatise to correct them. For that we would need historians and biographers like Andrew Roberts, who attend to the smallest details in order to paint the broadest possible picture of the past, including those parts we might wish to tune out. Yet the world also needs storytellers like Robert Harris, who alter certain details,

omit others, and invent still others for the purpose of attracting our attention, stirring our emotions, and in the right circumstances sparking our curiosity about what *really* happened.

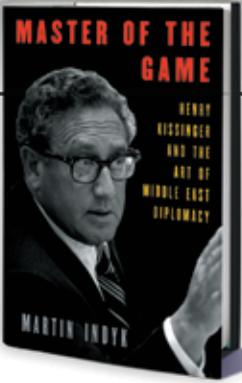
This last point is crucial, because in the wrong circumstances, this same license gets abused by those who out of greed, ambition, and lust for power cast aside the accumulated wisdom of historians and biographers. The name for this abuse is propaganda, and in free societies it is permitted. Indeed, if Putin had sought an American publisher for “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” he would have received any number of lucrative offers. But given his insistence that maintaining the mythic boundaries of Mother Russia is sufficient justification for the wanton destruction of a people whom he claims as his spiritual kin, Putin would also have had to face something he very much dislikes: honest criticism.

In matters of war and peace, or life and fate (the titles of two very great Russian novels), the stories we tell ourselves must be truthful. As Anna Reid writes about Putin, “He may now be learning that reality is hard to defy: the wages of bad history are disaster in the present.” Let us hope that the lesson arrives sooner than the disaster.

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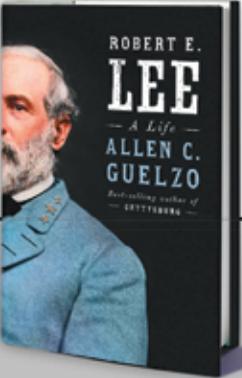


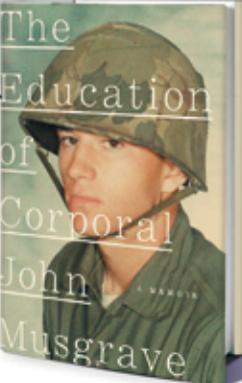
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