Defeat

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Koselleck wrote that defeat in war is the greatest transformational experience because it maximizes the distance between a planned course of action and an unplanned outcome. Therefore, as unpleasant or traumatic as it may be, being defeated “contains an inexhaustible epistemological potential” and has stood behind many innovations in historical methodology, including his own following his experience as a soldier of the defeated German army.

Reinhart Koselleck, Radio Operator

A long time ago in a mental galaxy far, far away there was a decade known as the 1960s. It began with the hope that a revolution would abolish capitalism; it ended with the fear that the revolution itself had become a capitalist commodity. “The revolution will not be televised,” Gil Scott-Heron insisted in 1970, “the revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox.” A few years later Jean Baudrillard added that the revolution cannot be televised because mass media hollow out and decontextualize the singular revolutionary event. A revolution resembles Walter Benjamin’s work of art: Mediation and reproducibility destroy its aura, hence the best way to neutralize it is to administer “a mortal dose of publicity.” In 1989, however, the so-called televised revolution in Romania appeared to suggest that revolutions may indeed be triggered, fueled, born along or maybe even replaced and simulated by televised images.

Twenty years later, media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1943–2011) added his own idiosyncratic take. Kittler was less interested in the contested mediation of revolutionary events than in the ways in which revolutions separate media-technological standards. The Ceausescu regime, he claimed, had strangled Romanian television to the point where it amounted to little more than a repetitive set of stills and showpieces deifying the Conducător and his wife. At the same time, however, the regime remained fixated on subversive written communication, which it tried to control by keeping close tabs on copiers and typewriters. The revolution could not have been brought to anybody “by Xerox” since any pamphlet could have been traced back to a particular keyboard. This rear-view mirror approach, however, produced a crucial blind spot. More and more Romanians, Kittler claimed, were heading to Berlin to purchase “tons” of video recorders (yes, he uses the word tonnenweise) to satisfy a thirst for images the regime ignored. Once TV stations
had been occupied, the revolution was able to piggyback on a flood of released images.

The “televised” Romanian revolution, so this strange story goes, showed how revolutions make use of the newest media technology. According to Kittler, this has happened many times before. The French Revolution introduced the mechanical telegraph; the Belgian revolution of 1830 was sparked by a performance of Daniel Auber’s *La Muette de Portici*, the first of the nineteenth-century grand operas; the Russian Revolution turned Red Square into the first public space completely covered by loudspeakers. As in the Romanian scenario, the power of the latest technologies used by the revolutionaries was so great because the forces in power were so ignorant of them.

To illustrate his point, Kittler jumps from revolution to war by comparing Ceausescu to Hitler. It was telecommunicative hubris—the feeling of complete control arising from the constant access to all frontline commanders—that prompted Hitler’s strategic blunders.

Take the German tank division on the Eastern Front, take Hitler’s megalomania: As long as radio connections remain intact, the Russian mud in a certain way does not exist. This results in a feeling that virtually everything can be done [*virtuelle Machbarkeit*]—much to the detriment of the tank divisions. After all, [Friedrich] Paulus [Commander-in-chief of the German forces encircled in Stalingrad] could be reached by phone until the very moment of surrender.4

Frictionless communication blinds Hitler to the friction of war. And now, Kittler’s special twist: Allegedly, one of those responsible for establishing contact between Hitler and Paulus was none other than a young Wehrmacht soldier named Reinhart Koselleck. The interviewer is floored: “Das ist ja wirklich abgefahren... That’s really far out [...] Koselleck and General Paulus on the phone...That truly is the perfect historico-philosophical constellation.” Kittler’s dry response: *Ja, so wird man Historiker*—“Yes, that’s how you become a historian.”5

**What a Loser: Thucydides at Stalingrad**

Okay. Hold on.6 First, the idea that in the days leading up to the revolution hordes of Romanians had the money and opportunity to flock to East Berlin to purchase “tons” of video recorders and smuggle them back into Romania is, mildly put, fanciful. Second, the Romanian revolution was not the Arab Spring. Romanian television remained a centralized affair; it did not turn into a distribution center for
communal guerrillero footage. Third, Koselleck at Stalingrad. He was severely injured in July 1942, that is, months before the battle started, and he did not return to active duty in the East until March 1945. Hitler and Paulus had to make do without him.

Ma se non è vero è ben trovato. The fable no doubt is a “perfect” capture of the personal circumstances which gave rise to Koselleck’s own career as well as of the “historico-philosophical constellation” which gave rise to the very idea of history. Koselleck admitted the former: “I built up my entire studies through the experience of war.” Indeed, reading the hundreds of pages on the eighteenth century, the Sattelzeit, and the French Revolution, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that Koselleck, bluntly put, is actually writing about something else he cannot write about directly. The rhetoric of ruptures, the constant emphasis on transformations and caesuras in the collective processing of time – isn’t he circumscribing the catastrophes of his own lifetime? At the center of his work was the experience of defeat. But as Koselleck readers know, to be a loser is a winning proposition, especially if you are a historian. This is the gist of the Besiegentheorem or loser’s theorem elaborated in the concluding section of the programmatic essay, “Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change: A Historical-Anthropological Essay.” Behind “many innovations in the field of new methodological interpretations of history” from Thucydides, to Machiavelli, to Tocqueville, to Niebuhr, Koselleck wrote, “stand very personal defeats and generation-specific waves of experience.”

The basic gamble of the essay is to concretize a given set of anthropological premises related to the interplay between expectations and experiences by introducing specific historical conditions under which said premises are particularly prominent. Koselleck argues (and it is such a persuasive argument it almost sounds like common sense) that the impact of new, unexpected experiences depends on the degree to which they deviate from expectations derived from past experiences. If things do not go as planned, it is not enough to adjust future expectations, it becomes necessary to reassess past experiences and ask, “What went wrong?” and “How do I have to change my thinking in order to avoid repeating my mistake?” Those who misconstrue the future need to reassess the past in new ways—and nothing in history requires this more urgently than defeat in war. Defeat is the greatest transformational experience because it maximizes the distance between a planned course of action and an unplanned outcome. Therefore, as unpleasant or traumatic as it may be, being defeated “contains an inexhaustible epistemological potential.” In order to make sense of...
their experience, the vanquished are both compelled and able to elaborate new methodological tools for the interpretation of history.

The written version of the essay was first published in 1986, and it only saw the light of day because Koselleck’s editor, Christian Meier, kept pestering him to finish the job. For Meier, a historian intimately familiar with the ups and downs of classical Athens, Koselleck’s link between the transformational experience of defeat and the elaboration of new historiographical methods could not but evoke the Athenian beginning of the historian’s trade. The main protagonist of this polemicoepistemological ur-scene is Thucydides, the patriarch of historiography who set out to understand Athens’ catastrophic defeat at the hands of Sparta by redesigning the toolbox elaborated by his fellow patriarch Herodotus, who had struggled to understand the unexpected Greek victory over the Persians. Thucydides, of course, had been personally involved; he was a former Athenian general exiled for his failure to relieve the besieged city of Amphipolis in time. Those who come too late are condemned by history to become historians.

Kittler’s questionable vignette captures the martial apriori of history. Kittler’s Koselleck is Thucydides at Stalingrad, the implicated witness in possession of insider knowledge of the hubristic delusion that led to traumatic defeat. The moral of the story is that in the long run understanding rather than merely suffering defeat beats merely enjoying rather than understanding victory. Historians, it is said, outperform the Almighty because they can change the past; and it appears that they first acquired this power by developing the uncanny skill of losing a war better than the other side won it. This, then, is nothing less than the story of how history came about: There was a time in which Thucydides contributed to the Athenian defeat; there then was a time in which he contemplated how this defeat came about; and then there came a time in which he had contained and epistemologically overcome the defeat by creating something called history in which the defeat was assigned its meaningful place. Ja, so wird man Historiker.

At the Beginning and End of Human History

But if war brought history into being, will it also end with war? If Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War stand at the beginning of history, do Koselleck and the Second World War stand at its end? There is a hidden subtext in Kittler’s vignette which points in that direction. Ultimately, it matters little whether or not Koselleck listened in on Hitler, for there was a much greater eavesdropper at work. As Kittler knew well, one major reason for the Wehrmacht’s defeat was the fact that the Allies were
eavesdropping as well. The Romanian analogy is obvious. The tight control of state-run Romanian television creates the need and the opportunity for the circulation of new, freelance images—and Romanians flock to German electronics dealers (wrong). The Wehrmacht’s seemingly impenetrable communication infrastructure creates the need and the opportunity for interception and decryption—and the Allies install the first computer at Bletchley Park (not wrong). Wars, like revolutions, are cauldrons of media-technological innovation that benefit from the delusions of its users.

But the greater the agency of media technologies in wars and revolutions, the smaller the benefits of subsequent human reflection. What if—in a scenario Gill Scott-Heron did not consider—the revolution proceeds to copy or televise itself? What if war is not a human struggle between nations or ideologies, but a nonhuman struggle between technologies, networks, and infrastructures? If the latter is the case, then the only illuminating insight clever losers may come up with is that no human party won the war—which, incidentally, is pretty much Kittler’s own take on World War II. Once the fate of human collectives, coded as a realm of politics, was removed from divine whims, we entered an interregnum of time called history; it will end when that fate is moved into the realm of machines and media. Koselleck felt this; at times he must have suspected that history may be entering a stage in which we cannot even benefit from defeat. Which is why the defeated historian had to go back into the past in order to write a precarious history of the present.

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5 Kittler and Rau, 152.
6 For the following I am indebted to Maria Bucur, Ilinca Iurascu, and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz.
9 Catlin, “Catastrophe.”