

The Ostland Protocol

An alternate history thriller

by

Lutz von Peter

edited and translated into English

by

Laura Massey

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Translator: Laura Massey

Cover design: negrorichi@yahoo.com

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Prologue

11 January 1941

It was bitterly cold. He stamped his feet hard on the uneven ground at regular intervals as he walked down the long side of the factory hall. The pain shot up his legs, but it was better than numb feet. Anything but frostbite. He looked down the passageway that led to the front of the building. Rough, unfinished concrete. The walls had probably once been white, but almost everywhere the paint was peeling off. Through the misty glass he looked out over the snow-covered field and the little birch grove beyond. It was quiet outside. Very quiet. A relief really after the non-stop aircraft overhead and the massive artillery fire of the previous week. Up to two or three days ago, you could still hear occasional thundering. At the start there had still been gunfire and artillery, but since then it had fallen quiet. The whole front seemed somehow frozen under the snowfall from two days ago and it had not moved since. He looked at his watch – two and a half hours until he went off duty. Then he would trudge five hundred metres through the snow and warm up in the troop quarters. The others would give him funny looks because he had not been with them outside and he would try to get some sleep. Then four hours later he'd be back here, guarding this shitty, crumbling, draughty, freezing factory hall. He would guard the hall and the two solitary corpses lying on camp beds in a corner. Because there was no doubt that those were corpses under those sheets. He gazed absently at the swirling clouds of his breath. Was it colder outside than in here? Of course it was, though it was hard to imagine. When he finished his watch and went back into the open air, the cold would pounce on him like a wild animal, although right now he thought he would never feel warm again as long as he lived.

He wondered how they'd died. Why hadn't they been laid out in the room next to the field hospital like the others, but instead been left lying here alone since yesterday? And why had they declared a four hundred-metre exclusion zone around the building?

They had been kept in this building for four days. Thank God he had only had to stand guard in the hall since yesterday, when nothing had been moving any more. Only the two camp beds covered with white sheets, under which you could see the outline of two bodies. But his comrades who had stood guard during the two previous days had looked terrible when they returned to the troop quarters. And even from a considerable distance away, you could hear the roaring and screaming of the dying pair. The guards had disappeared before anyone could ask them questions. Moved to other units, recalled, maybe given leave. All very strange. In the lonely hours of his guard duty, he could have walked across the hall and pulled back the sheets. But not knowing how the pair had met their miserable end, it wasn't hard to curb his curiosity. *Curiosity killed the cat!* Somewhere, in some other life before the war, it seemed an age away now, he had come across this English saying and always wondered which cat it was talking about.

Voices and footsteps at the dark end of the passageway. Imperceptibly he tensed and waited to see who would step into the dim light of the factory hall. Two silhouettes appeared in the passage opening. He immediately recognised the man on the left as Dr. Köhler, the regimental doctor, and relaxed a little. The other had to be top brass. He wore the peaked officer's cap and even wrapped from boots to cheekbones in a thick sheepskin coat, he radiated authority. They walked nearer and he could make out the face of the unknown man. No one from the regiment. From a different regiment? Maybe division HQ?

He gave a stiff salute. "Private Weidlich on death watch duty, nothing to report!"

The two men nodded and entered the large hall, walking past him without paying him further attention. Their footsteps echoed through the high-ceilinged space illuminated by the reflection of the sun on the snow. Weidlich remained standing where he had been all the time.

"How many did you have in your regiment?" asked the officer.

His voice was pleasant, but firm and somewhat strained, as if he didn't really want to hear the answer.

"These two," replied the regimental doctor.

The other man raised an eyebrow and then nodded appreciatively, "Only two? That's excellent. Really excellent. Have the men got wind of what's going on?"

"Yes, although we isolated them here as quickly as we could."

"Then how could they have found out?"

"Are you joking? First that order about the water. And then suddenly two comrades fall down, writhing in convulsions and screaming like they've been stuck on a spit? I can rattle on about epilepsy as long as I like, but with the two of them not being taken to a normal field hospital but isolated here instead, and then a four hundred-metre exclusion zone declared around the isolation unit..."

"Four hundred? The order was for two hundred."

"You obviously haven't had any cases near HQ. You should have heard those chaps bellowing, four hundred wasn't even enough. If it had been two hundred, there'd have been no point setting up an exclusion zone. At night they could still be heard screaming from the troop barracks, on the first night anyway. After that their strength gave out."

"I want to see them," said the officer evenly.

The doctor looked at him uncertainly. "Are you sure? It's a ghastly sight, even for a doctor."

"Do it."

The doctor bent down, grasped the edge of a sheet and raised it. Weidlich could see nothing from where he was standing, the position of the two men blocked what was revealed under the sheet. The officer turned away abruptly and fought for composure.

"Those bastards," he swore, as the doctor replaced the sheet, "those filthy pigs. And they talk about *Untermenschen*..." He turned on his heel and stormed past the guard. Weidlich saw a glint in the officer's eyes. Tears? Dr. Köhler followed him out more slowly, but he also seemed ill at ease.

12 January 1941

Leaning over the map table, Colonel von Zielinski traced a line with his finger and then stood upright again. "It can't be," he muttered. He bent forward again. His finger traced the same slightly irregular semicircle as before. "Möglingen, read out the names one more time."

The man he addressed, a few years younger than himself, answered "Yes, Colonel," and began slowly to read out a series of place names. With each name, the commander's outstretched index finger advanced a few centimetres until, as before, it completed the crooked semicircle.

"Müller, I want to talk to division." Müller picked up the handset and spoke to the switchboard operator then hung up.

While the connection was being put through the various switchboards, Zielinski wondered aloud: "Why are they removing us from here and sending us to the other side of the pocket? And on such a tight and precise schedule?"

He looked questioningly at the lieutenant colonel. He shrugged. "Have you verified the order?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"So there can be no mistake, no interference from the Russians?"

"No, Colonel. I called division HQ. They confirmed it."

"And nothing about a replacement unit to occupy our position?"

"No, Colonel."

The telephone rang and Müller held up the receiver: "Division HQ, Colonel."

Zielinski went and stood by the telephone table, lifted the heavy Bakelite earpiece and held it to his ear. "Zielinski here."

From the receiver came a shrill reply.

"Yes, I know Möglingen has already called. Is it at least clear who'll be plugging the hole we're tearing in the pocket?"

More shrill chatter at the other end.

"No, it is not enough. Not by a long shot. Put the chief on the line." A brief reply. "I don't care. I want to talk to him, now." A few beats of silence followed. "Excuse me, Lieutenant-general. I just wanted to... yes, Möglingen told me... The whole division?" Zielinski opened his eyes wide. Amazement and disbelief showed on his face. "Could you repeat that? ... Yes... The pocket will be... With your permission, Lieutenant-general, there are over half a million heavily armed Russians in the pocket... Yes... Yes of course... Yes, I understand."

He stared straight ahead and very slowly put the receiver back onto its cradle. He gazed blankly through the window until Möglingen cleared his throat: "Colonel?"

As if emerging from a deep sleep, the regimental commander murmured: "All units securing the pocket to go to a new deploy-

ment line further east ... the pocket is being dissolved ... more than half a million enemies to our rear. Just keep marching as if they weren't there..." His gaze went to Möglingen. "Have the orders issued and calculate within the given timeframe as generously as possible."

"Colonel, the time frame is very tight. I don't know..."

"Do your best. Over the next few days, 800,000 men around Moscow will be moving eastwards. Expect the odd traffic jam," he smiled grimly, "and see that our schedule looks good, at least on paper. God only knows if we'll be able to stick to it."

Möglingen stared open-mouthed at his superior.

UN

Marseille, Vieux Port, 1993.

It was definitely the best seat in the café. From early in the morning the sun shone over the wide expanse of the Vieux Port, the neighbouring streets and square. On this white limestone terrace, the metal bistro tables and chairs were bathed in a flattering honey-coloured light. Anyone finding it too warm, despite the lateness of the season, could sit at one of the tables under the arcades, in the semi-shade provided by the light reflecting off the pale-coloured ground.

The waiter spotted the man once again sitting in the first row of tables next to the street, at his usual place, punctually arriving as soon as the daylight turned from yellow to orange. Not every day, sometimes he didn't come for a week or two, but always at the same time of day.

Unprompted, he served him an espresso and a glass of cognac.

"Bonsoir, monsieur, vous allez bien?" he asked, his standard greeting.

"Très bien, merci." Barely an accent, where is he from? The man reluctantly tore his eyes away from the glowing orange façades on the opposite side of the harbour, looked up and gave him a slight smile. Then his glance moved quickly along the rows of tables, through the arcades and across the street, following the edge of the harbour basin, coming to rest on the houses of the Rive Neuve.

The waiter knew this all-encompassing glance only too well. Marseille was Marseille after all. There were plenty of people in the Zone with good reason to be cautious. But it was an unusual gesture here, the café was too much like a goldfish bowl.

"Get some matches for me, please." The man had put a packet of Rothandle on the table and was looking up again.

“Right away, sir.” *Rothändige*. German maybe? But no trace of an accent. His dark hair and complexion more like someone from round here, and his sharp features, dark, almost black eyes and wiry medium-sized physique. But his attitude, the firmness of his gestures, the authority he exuded suggested otherwise. Somehow the man was in command. It was not in his stature, rather in how he spoke, his look, how he moved. Yes, definitely used to being in command. He called the stranger *Capitaine* – the captain. No, he was not from the Midi, probably not French either. He just couldn’t make the man out.

With the casual enjoyment typical of a long-time smoker, Capitaine breathed the pungent cigarette smoke deep into his lungs, waited a moment and then released a whitish cloud into the orange light. His whole world seemed to be reduced to this act of smoking, an occasional sip of cognac or coffee and the play of colours on the harbour and the houses. His face turned towards the water, he leaned back comfortably in his chair, while somehow remaining straight, seemingly engrossed and still. Only his eyes, seeking out a new object from time to time, and the cigarette, as he occasionally extinguished one and lit a new one without looking down, showed that he was not a mannequin.

The darkness fell slowly, orange giving way to ever darker shades of blue. The first streetlights came on, and Capitaine appeared to wake up as if from a long, deep sleep; he looked around, noted the comings and goings of people at neighbouring tables and on the street just in front of him. The afternoon pastis and coffee drinkers and families had made way for the evening clientele stopping by for an aperitif before dinner. All the tables now seemed to be occupied, and he was surprised he hadn’t picked up on the conversations going on around him.

“Excuse me.”

He turned in the direction of the voice with a slight Maghreb accent. A middle-aged businessman, small paunch, high hairline...

"I see you smoke Roth ndle." Capitaine nodded. "I haven't smoked one for a long time. May I..."

Wordlessly, Capitaine took his pack from the table, knocked out a few cigarettes and proffered the pack to the man. The brand was not widely available in France and the Zone, but you could get hold of it. Capitaine wondered what the stranger wanted.

He took one, lit it and inhaled the smoke. "Hmmm, not bad, not bad at all." He examined the burning cigarette and laughed. "And they say that the Germans can't grow tobacco. May I give you one of mine...?" He held out a slightly crumpled pack with an Arabic inscription. "Please..."

Capitaine looked at the cigarettes, smiled briefly again and then politely declined. Shortly after, he placed a two-mark note on the table, rose and walked along the quay towards the Caneb  re, where he disappeared among the evening crowds.

Capitaine closely observed the figure heading for the caf   along the quay. How did he know that man? Where had he seen him before? Was he being tailed? Had they started looking for him again? It was possible. Had they never stopped looking for him and only found him now, after all these years? They had said they would leave him alone, but would they have kept their word? They weren't afraid of anything, they wouldn't think twice about reneging on their promise if the agreement had become inconvenient for them. Still, it was hardly likely, not after ten years. But you never knew... Capitaine subtly shifted his position until he could see the passageway between the cafe and the neighbouring house. If he stood up, the flowerpots with the bougainvilleas would shield him from view until he was under the vault of the

arcades, from there a jump and he would be in the narrow passageway between the houses. He knew from a previous exploration undertaken a long time ago that the passageway led to a tiny square which opened onto four or five streets, all of which branched off shortly afterwards and got lost somewhere in the maze of the old harbour district. It was the perfect escape route for all occasions. He had chosen this table ages ago because of the beautiful view of the Rive Neuve and the escape route. The passageway between the houses was unobstructed and so was the path by the flowerpots that led there.

He turned back to the new arrival.

He knew the guy, but the memory felt unthreatening. The alarm bells were still ringing in his head, they rang every time he recognised someone, but could not immediately place them. But that had been his habit for years. He'd have to plan until his dying day, caution was just ingrained in him. But somehow Capitaine was sure that if the arrival had really been a threat, his instincts would have sent him a much clearer warning.

The man made a beeline for the next table, sat down and gave him a friendly greeting. Capitaine had no choice but to incline his head in reply. Only when the other laid a crumpled pack of cigarettes on the table in front of him did the penny drop: the man who asked for cigarettes! He relaxed imperceptibly. Neither the SS nor the secret service would be so clumsy. He unbent a little and allowed himself a smile in the direction of the cigarette-man.

This encouraged the man to say, "This is one of the most beautiful places in the Zone to enjoy the autumn light."

Capitaine murmured his agreement.

"We saw each other a week or so ago, didn't we? You offered me a cigarette."

You asked me for one, thought Capitaine, giving him a brief nod.

“Do you know Marseille well?” Capitaine now felt obliged to contribute at least a little to the conversation.

“I come here regularly but know it...” he left the end of the sentence hanging in the air “...you never really know this city.”

Silence fell again.

“You speak excellent French.” The questioner seemed uncomfortable with the silence.

“Thank you, I get by.”

The questioner looked at him, clearly hoping for something more; but even those of a garrulous nature notice if their interlocutor is reluctant to talk. The silence between them carried the day.

DEUX

The weather had turned cooler, rainy and grey. High summer was over and most of the tourists had gone. Every so often there were days when it would have been just warm enough to sit on the terrace and the waiter toyed with the idea of bringing out the chairs and tables again, but it wasn't warm enough for people to want to linger outside. Only the determined coffee drinkers would choose to go out there now.

Most of the guests came because of the terrace. The chintzy interior attracted far fewer people and the winter season was therefore rather quiet. The only person who came with unwavering regularity was Capitaine, and increasingly also his new friend, the Moroccan. Through late summer and autumn, they had often chanced to sit near each other, beginning to greet each other more and having the odd conversation. Capitaine had even tried the Moroccan's cigarettes, but only once. Towards the middle of November, there had been a period of maybe two or three weeks when the Moroccan preferred to sit inside because of the weather while Capitaine stayed outside under the arcades – it had felt like a separation. Since then, both men usually sat inside, naturally on different tables. But the waiter sensed that they waited for each other and they grew twitchy when one of them did not come to the café for a couple of days.

The conversations had started harmlessly enough, cigarettes had been the first subject. The weather too, obviously. The rumours in the Marseille Free Trade Zone and what was going on beyond its confines in France. They were pleased to discover a shared interest in recent history and talked at length about the unrest in the Middle East, and the political instability in the Republic of Grand Maghreb. The Moroccan perked up and animatedly told

Capitaine about his youth in a village in the Atlas mountains. He spoke about legendary bands of brigands and his dark eyes flashed as he recounted legends and stories full of heroes and wonders.

He could not hide his bitterness when he spoke about the powerful people in his country that had always spoken French. Those traitors that had sold out the country's interests when France was still one of the Great Powers. Those traitors that had granted asylum to the last dreamers and warmongers who still thought of France as *la Grande Nation*. Traitors that had ruined their country in a foolish attempt to create a counterbalance to the Greater German Welfare Sphere by creating that idiotic Republic of Grand Maghreb. And traitors that, after forty years of struggle, could neither pacify their new empire, lessen its inner turmoil nor create even moderate levels of wealth with its economy.

"Aren't you going a bit far there?" Capitaine interjected. "I don't think it was the intention of the Grand Maghreb government to invite all those marauders, *France libre* units and whatever else to—"

"Not their intention?!" the Moroccan retorted. "Not their intention?! In what way was it 'not their intention'?"

Capitaine had evidently not expected such a heated reaction. "Well, the creation of Grand Maghreb—"

"The creation of Grand Maghreb was a crime!" shouted the Moroccan and pounded the table with his fist. He jumped up, fists on the table, chin thrust forward, breathing heavily and glared at Capitaine.

The waiter, who had always stayed in the background, approached with a worried expression. The Moroccan dropped back heavily into his chair. Capitaine addressed him very calmly: "Why don't you tell me?"

The Moroccan rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes, then

replied: "Please accept my apologies. So many lies are told these days. It just makes me see red."

Capitaine repeated: "Why don't you tell me?"

"I told you that I grew up in a village in the Atlas." Capitaine nodded. "It was more like a town really. We were responsible for the administration and tax collection in our town and a handful of villages. For generations, members of my family were the mayors. It was not an official position, more a sort of a hereditary role, my family simply made decisions about things. People came to us when they needed advice, to resolve a quarrel between neighbours or when they needed money. We were accountable to the governor in the nearest big city for collecting taxes and keeping our district peaceful. And for that reason we were in charge of our town and the surrounding villages. We obviously spoke French at home, we were a good family after all. But we also spoke Berbère and Arab." He fell silent. "I do not think that our people would have elected somebody else to lead them if they had had the choice. We were their leaders," he stated and added with a hint of defiance: "that was how things were back then." He fell silent again. "Do not get me wrong: my brothers and I went to a boarding school in Tangier. We knew the French culture from childhood and even appreciated it, which the people in our town did not. But it was not our culture. We were Moroccans, we had our own culture. We knew many *pieds noirs*." He saw Capitaine's puzzled look. "French people born and living in Northern Africa. We rubbed shoulders with them, but they were French, we were Moroccans. We appreciated their culture, but they were not our people. They were foreigners and some families had lived with us for several generations."

He was quiet for several moments until Capitaine asked: "And Grand Maghreb?"

The Moroccan lifted his head, fire in his eyes, his voice trembling with barely suppressed fury: “Grand Maghreb? Do you really think any Moroccan, Tunisian or Egyptian would have come up with such an idea?”

Capitaine shrugged his shoulders. “No? Who did then?”

The Moroccan snorted. “After the French capitulation in 1940, many French people went to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Most did not come because they wanted to live with us or because they loved Morocco. They did not want to live in their own country because it was occupied by the Germans and there were already many *pieds noirs* that had settled comfortably in our lands. That madman De Gaulle’s broadcast gave them hope—”

“Charles De Gaulle? The French rabble-rouser? The June 1940 broadcast from London?” Capitaine asked.

The Moroccan nodded. “Yes, his appeal to fight on from the colonies. Those crackpots thought they could continue their struggle against the Germans and they chose our country as their base of operations. That De Gaulle was killed that same year by his own people took the wind out the sails of that first wave of immigrants. But after the French Reunification—”

“1956?” Capitaine interjected.

The other man nodded. “When the two French states appeared to be developing fairly well, starting to grow fat in the Greater German Welfare Sphere, and then decided to reunify in free elections, a second, much larger wave of immigrants flooded our country. And these people did not come to set up a base of operations. They came to stay.”

He seemed to lose himself in his own thoughts for a moment. “They were everywhere and it caused friction. Here and there, in small towns and in the countryside, there were riots. Who had done what to whom, the fault was often difficult to decide. Both

sides quickly drew arms. Those who had come in the hope of reconquering France opened up their secret weapon stashes. Those who had hoped for a new home defended what they saw as their right to stay. The troubles grew worse and worse. And then the *France libre* militias, who had been inactive since their arrival in North Africa, offered to help the government re-establish peace. Without a second thought, the government accepted their offer and from one day to the next acquired battle-hardened, well equipped, albeit somewhat rusty, rapid deployment forces. It was the hidden part of the agreement that the government probably had not understood and that spelled the end of Morocco.”

Capitaine raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

“The rapid deployment forces were not liked by the people they were used against, they created bitterness and resentment. Very quickly, word went around that the French and *pieds noirs* had nothing to fear from them. The rioting grew worse and worse, repression by the *France libre* troops became more and more drastic. This drove a wedge between the Moroccan population and the French-speaking upper class.”

“Like your family?”

“Like my family... even though... No, not really. My family broke apart because not everybody chose to side with the French.” It was evident from his expression on which side he had stood. He continued: “The government increasingly allowed their power to be propped up by the immigrants, partly borne of sheer necessity, but also because they felt superior to the ignorant rabble, *parlez français, c’est plus chic*, as they said back then, speak French, it’s more classy. At some point, the well-equipped and well-trained French had become an essential support for the state, and it was then that the concept of Grand Maghreb arose: unify all of North Africa and begin a counter concept to the Greater German Welfare