

Twenty-nine

by Arkadiusz Kwapiszewski

How many of their lives for one of ours?

I sat in my office – armed with an abacus and wielding a pencil in my clenched fist – and battled with this essentially mathematical problem. The task was to balance one side of the equation with the other. On the left, the life of our soldier, stabbed from behind by an enemy hand and found dead in the gutter the next morning. On the right, the unknown quantity: how many of their men did we need to slaughter in revenge? Despite my commitment to the cause, my calculations appeared to make no sense.

The real war refused to be reduced to a formula on a flat piece of paper. I arrived at the insoluble paradox: however many of these dogs we put to death, the number wouldn't come close to compensating for the infinite loss of our man. Even if I were to multiply zeroes for an eternity, zeroes would always remain zeroes, endless rows of zeroes, just zeroes and nothing but zeroes. A sheer waste of space on the page – and since paper was a scarce resource during wartime, I had no choice but to erase the zeroes in order to make room for other reckonings. In a sense, this had always been the philosophy behind our invasion: to wipe out the worthless scribbles and fill the blank slate with the best poetry of our race.

But I had not been promoted to the rank of an officer to indulge in philosophical speculations. This was not about idealism and theoretical utopias. It was about setting a precedent; it was about the letter of the law and its merciless rule; it was about preventing

them from raising a hand against us ever again. Writing down commands on a slip of paper, I sent my soldiers to raid the market square for as many of these pigs as they could catch.

As I later read in a report, we had captured twenty-nine of them before the rest crawled back into their holes, hiding from us in fear and trembling. Twenty-nine of these flea-infested rats, due to be executed in precisely seven minutes, their corpses piled up on the street, acting as a deterrent, a warning for the future: *twenty-nine of you had to die because you murdered one of us.*

Displeased, I snapped my pencil in half. I pushed the abacus off my desk. We could not leave it at twenty-nine! The uneven number was simply asking for resistance, another act of rebellion, if not a full-blown uprising. What ideas would these cockroaches get into their heads when they saw the sign: *twenty-nine of you had to die because you murdered one of us?*

‘Twenty-nine?’ they would ask themselves. ‘Why only twenty-nine? Why not thirty?’ And they would interpret our meticulous exactness as hair-splitting – a sign of weakness on our part. Feeble-minded, they were bound to read the most improbable scenarios into an innocent number. They would imagine a thirtieth victim who managed to save his life: freeing himself, fighting back, perhaps even wounding one of ours before escaping to join the underground resistance. As if there even was an underground resistance! As if there was anywhere to escape! After years of occupation, I knew these vermin better than they knew themselves. In their eyes, the pile of corpses, the devastating symbol of their own worthlessness, was sure to be distorted, to incite them into suicidal battle.

Seething with hatred, I straightened the edges of the unsatisfactory report before me. Lying was out of the question. I refused to fabricate a death toll. I had my honour. I

harboured a great love of truth. I would never stoop to the level of these compulsive liars, these slimy crawling snakes. And what if they counted the bodies? I wouldn't put it past them – a disaster in terms of propaganda!

Restless, I shot up from the desk. I took a pistol out of the drawer. I was going to take a short walk around the town, determined to kill the first of these bugs that got in my way. I swore I would!

Thirty of you had to die because you murdered one of us.

I marched towards a nameless man leaning against a street lamp on the other side of the road. He looked up from his newspaper only when I aimed the barrel at his face, giving him enough time to notice the gun, but not to realise its significance.

A loud explosion in exchange for a corpse. I smiled with satisfaction. It was that simple. Like a market transaction.

But now the road was infested with other insects, running in fear. Cries for help. Confusion and commotion. A man charging at me with bare fists, shouting in a language I did not understand. Was he a relative? A friend? A deranged madman? I swore with annoyance, but didn't want to take any risks – I shot him down.

Two dead germs at my feet. The deserted street grew silent.

A young soldier came running from our headquarters, asking if I had been injured. I dismissed him with an angry shake of my fist. I was irritated. What was I supposed to do with the surplus corpse? I had literally overshot!

I cursed the Greeks for inventing the decimal system.

I cursed the Romans for taking it on.

I cursed evolution for endowing man with five fingers on each hand.

Thirty-one of you had to die because you murdered one of us?

Thirty-one people can die in an accident, but not as a punishment for their crimes – not as a result of deliberate human action. I had to round it up to forty.

But why stop at forty? Wasn't fifty a more elegant choice?

A hundred?

Sighing, I staggered back to my office and gave the orders.

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