

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Tera Reid-Olds, Ph.D.

***The Tartar Steppe / Il deserto dei Tartari* (1945)**

Dino Buzzati

OVERVIEW

Dino Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* is the story of Giovanni Drogo, a young military officer assigned to Fort Bastiani, a remote outpost overlooking a northern desert in an unnamed country. The novel spans a period of thirty years, during which the garrison at Fort Bastiani waits for an enemy to advance. Drogo's days are filled with monotonous drills and strict regulations, designed to keep the soldiers vigilant and fit for the anticipated battle. By the time the threat materializes in the form of an army moving across the desert, marching on the fort, Drogo is a veteran soldier in poor health, no longer fit for battle. In an ironic twist, he is denied the glory of combat he has spent his whole life waiting for and dies alone during his journey home.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Dino Buzzati (1906-1972) is considered one of the great contemporary Italian authors. Employed by the Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera* from his early twenties until his death, Buzzati's writing style was influenced by his background in journalism. Buzzati wrote *The Tartar Steppe* in 1939, though it was not published until 1945. The pre-war period depicted in this novel was likely informed by Buzzati's own experience during World War II. The political climate of the time also influenced the name of the book. As translator Lawrence Venuti notes, Buzzati's original title for the novel, *La Fortezza*, or *The Stronghold*, was rejected by the publisher for the explicit military reference. Although he is a celebrated short story writer, artist, and poet, *The Tartar Steppe* is considered Buzzati's most famous work and is often credited with popularizing magic realism in Italy, as the author's journalistic realism blends with Fort Bastiani's surreal enchantment of Drogo.

The Tartar Steppe is often compared to the existentialist work of French author, journalist, and philosopher, Albert Camus, who was also a contemporary of Buzzati. The novel is Buzzati's take on existentialism, as it interrogates, through the experiences of Giovanni Drogo and others, the meaning, value, and purpose of human life. To this end, Buzzati makes use of satire in *The Tartar Steppe*: exaggerating the stereotypes of military culture and pre-war anticipation, he creates a slow but inexorable build towards the inevitable conflict, but both Drogo and the reader are frustrated in the end. Rather than see how the long-awaited skirmish plays out between the desert enemy and the garrison, the reader departs the fort with Drogo at what should be the climax of the action and the novel ends with no resolution.

With roots in both magic realism and existentialism, *The Tartar Steppe* not only influenced a generation of Italian authors but continues to have a global impact on contemporary fiction. It was a prominent influence, for example, on South African writer J. M. Coetzee's celebrated novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).

MAIN CHARACTERS

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|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Giovanni Drogo | a soldier assigned to Fort Bastiani |
| Ortiz | a soldier assigned to Fort Bastiani |
| Francesco Vescovi | a civilian friend of Drogo |

STORY

Journey to the Fort One September morning, Giovanni Drogo puts on his lieutenant's uniform, says good-bye to his mother, and sets out for Fort Bastiani. Apart from his friend, Francesco Vescovi, who accompanies him on horseback for the first leg of the journey, Drogo travels alone and meets few people on the road. No one can tell him how long it will take to reach Fort Bastiani.

Meeting the Officer On the second day of his journey, Drogo notices a captain on horseback. The two men introduce themselves and from the officer, Drogo learns more about his new posting. Most lieutenants ask to be assigned to the fort for a two-year tour of duty before moving on. This is news to Drogo, who confesses that he was assigned the posting.

First Impressions Upon arriving at Fort Bastiani, Drogo finds it to be small, silent, and bare. It is completely isolated on the edge of the desert, with no village in sight. Initially excited to have reached his destination, he has second thoughts and upon meeting his superior officer requests to be transferred as soon as possible (after all, he didn't request this posting!).

The First Request The officer is sympathetic to Drogo, and he states that the easiest way to transfer out of the Fort is to go to sick bay and request a certificate from the doctor. Drogo is reluctant to lie and is persuaded to stay until the next medical inspection: in four months.

The Illness While visiting the regimental tailor to request a cloak, Drogo meets another man who gives him this piece of advice: leave the fort while you still can. When Drogo questions this, the man describes a "kind of illness" that traps some soldiers at the fort for decades.

A Soldier's Death Two years later, Drogo is still stationed at the fort when he notices a shadow moving in the dark. It is a black horse without a rider, stirring rumors that this could be the sign of an approaching enemy. One of the new recruits sneaks out to retrieve the horse, but when he attempts to re-enter the fort without knowing the password, he is shot and killed.

A Trip to Town After four uneventful years at the fort, Drogo takes leave to return to his hometown, visiting his family and catching up with his old friend Francesco. His mother intervenes to secure him an interview for a posting in the city, but Drogo fails to submit a request for transfer form in advance of the meeting and the interview does not go well.

The Enemy's Road As time passes, the fort loses importance, and its ranks are thinned out. Across the desert, visible only by telescope, a black line seems to be moving in the sand. Drogo becomes convinced that an army from the north is building a road to the fort. He maintains this belief for the next fifteen years, though no one else takes the threat seriously.

The Invasion When Drogo is fifty-four years old and second-in-command of the garrison, battalions of northern soldiers are reported on the road, marching towards the fort. Reinforcements are called.

Drogo's Departure But Drogo is ill, nearly bedbound, and unable to fight. As a result, a superior officer orders him to leave the fort. Drogo takes a carriage back to the city as battle looms but stops on his journey to stay at an inn. There, he passes away during the night.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Culture This novel provides a nuanced critique of military culture, which exploits youthful idealism, relies on a hierarchal system that is not transparent, and enforces arbitrary regulations. While Drogo can certainly be held responsible for his own complacency, he is also at a disadvantage because he does not have the "insider" knowledge required to network within this culture. In the absence of a high-ranking officer who could advocate on his behalf, he is overlooked or discouraged from any opportunities to grow beyond his assignment to Fort Bastiani. The promotions he eventually receives are the result of years of service, not any outstanding accomplishment. His ranks afford him some procedural deference but no real power, as he is all but forgotten by the end of the novel. Beyond Drogo's ill-fated career, additional implicit critiques of the military can be found in the gratuitous deaths of two fellow soldiers: one, shot by his friend for failure to utter the correct password and another, who dies during an unnecessary expedition into the desert. Buzzati thus takes military culture to task in two ways: one, in the representation of Drogo's wasted youth and two, in the

pointless deaths of the soldiers, both tragedies a result of “following orders.”

POLITICS

Leadership Buzzati’s critique extends to military leadership, which is characterized as inefficient at best and complicit in murder at worst. Fort Bastiani operates as a hierarchal system which relies on specific forms and procedures (accessible only to those who already know they exist) and a chain of command that delays any meaningful action. Realizing that Fort Bastiani is not the right posting for him, Drogo’s initial request to transfer is delayed for months and eventually abandoned. Rather than empower Drogo, Fort leadership manipulates him into accepting a situation he is uncomfortable with by exploiting a fear of retaliation from veteran officers and a reluctance to lie. The inefficiency of military leadership is further satirized by the unnecessarily complicated rules surrounding passwords at the Fort: Drogo is told that passwords change every twenty-four hours, and only the commanders are given the passwords. Should a commander fall ill, the remaining soldiers are stranded without means of reentering the Fort (even if the sentries recognize their compatriots). It is this regulation that results in the death of one soldier, who leaves the Fort to retrieve a horse without the right password; upon his return, he is recognized but denied reentry and subsequently shot. The inflexibility of military leadership is so extreme that it endangers those who answer to it.

PSYCHOLOGY

Alienation Drogo is first introduced as an outsider in his own village. He is out-of-step with the people around him; he spent his years at the military academy studying, leaving little time to cultivate friendships or romantic relationships. When he says good-bye to his mother, the conversation is stilted. Drogo describes his infrequent returns to the city after being stationed at Fort Bastiani: as his acquaintances build lives of their own, pursuing careers, getting married, and having children, Drogo finds it more and more difficult to relate to them. Due to his isolated situation at the fort, Drogo exists outside the community of the city’s inhabitants and without a family of his own, has no domestic anchor. He fills those gaps with the minutia of military life, but it is no substitute for bonds of friendship and family. The unique camaraderie of the military is explored through Drogo’s relationships with his superior officers and fellow soldiers, but these relationships are – at least for Drogo – superficial and circumstantial. A sense of alienation accompanies Drogo throughout the novel, and it culminates in his lonely death at an inn, surrounded by unfamiliar people and missed by no one.

Boredom The principle setting for this novel is Fort Bastiani, a remote military outpost that has not seen any combat in years. Located on the northern border of an unnamed country, the fort’s strategic significance is as a first defense against an incursion from the desert. All officers stationed here are waiting for one of two things: one, for their assignment to end so that they can be relocated somewhere more exciting or two, for the enemy to attack. With virtually no stimulation outside of the Fort (no town, no change in the landscape), boredom sets in over the course of days that seem to run together with no change: practice drills, guard shifts, and assorted routines that are never disrupted by unexpected action. The monotony of the assignment provides an opportunity to examine how individuals respond to boredom: some are intrinsically motivated by ambition and the desire to do more, driving them to break with routine. Others, like Drogo, accept boredom as part of life, surrendering to a predictable routine with only the faint dream of a glorious (and far from boring!) war to sustain them.

Loss Loss takes many forms in *The Tartar Steppe*: loss of autonomy as a low-ranked soldier who must follow the orders of his superiors; loss of life; and loss of opportunity, whether that be the result of sabotage or one’s own lack of motivation. The “illness” plaguing Drogo and other senior officers, those who never leave the fort to pursue other opportunities or enriching life experiences for fear of missing out on their moment of glory, is a prominent example of “loss of life” in *The Tartar Steppe*. The longer the officers spend waiting, the harder it is to accept they’ve wasted years with nothing to show for it. And for this reason, these men remain at the fort until forced to retire (or, in Drogo’s case, pass away from a combination of illness and old age). Loss of life, thus, has two interpretations in this novel. The literal interpretation is death, represented by the two soldiers who are (senselessly) killed and by Drogo’s own fate at the end of the novel. The second interpretation is loss of life by way of squandering one’s youth and potential. The tragedy of Drogo is that he loses his life year by year as he grows increasingly complacent and passive. When he finally dies at the end of the novel, there is a distinct sense that he will leave nothing meaningful behind.

FLAWS

Ambition The thirst for glory is a shared characteristic of the soldiers in Buzzati's novel: those who choose to stay at the fort do so out of a mistaken belief that their patience will be rewarded with a victorious battle from which they will emerge heroes. Those who transfer to coveted positions in the city see Fort Bastiani for what it is: a steppingstone. It is established at the outset of the novel that the garrison has a high turnover rate: soldiers volunteer for a two-year period serving on the frontier, and then move on to advance their careers elsewhere. Drogo himself has lofty aspirations for his career at the beginning of the novel, but he is unable to focus this abstract desire for glory and renown into a concrete course of action. When his mother arranges for him to interview for a transfer, Drogo is unpleasantly surprised to realize that several of his fellow soldiers have already applied for these positions, without informing him as to the correct procedure. This non-disclosure is implied to be deliberate because of the competitive nature of transfer requests: if Drogo does not understand the procedure, then his application will be unsuccessful, thus improving the chances that one of the other petitions will be approved. Drogo, while shocked by this incident, learns very little from it and never acquires the competitive edge he needs to be successful beyond Fort Bastiani. By the end of the novel, Drogo's superior officer is someone who once answered to him, but over the years managed to distinguish himself and secure several promotions. It is clear by this point that Drogo's ambitions have been eroded by complacency.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Giovanni Drogo

Character: At the beginning of the novel, Drogo is a young man eager to make his mark in the world. Having spent years studying at the military academy, he is anxious to start his life and to prove himself. In fact, he is so focused on the future that he is unable to live in the present, closed to new experiences and meaningful relationships. Drogo lets his life pass by, a series of missed opportunities and monotonous routines. This includes losing touch with childhood friends and falling out of love with his fiancé, Maria. The idea of charting a new path never crosses his mind, as he grows increasingly complacent with the status quo.

Illustrative Moments:

Anxious At the beginning of the novel, Drogo thinks back to his years studying at the military academy and worries that he has made a mistake trading the chance at his social life in the village for his books. In turning his attention from the past to the present, Drogo is anxious to fulfill his purpose as a soldier: to have his moment of glory. Upon arriving at Fort Bastiani, he starts to have doubts about his remote assignment and resolves to leave. But he is dissuaded from this course of action when a superior officer manipulates his fear of lying and of alienating his fellow soldiers. Four years later, Drogo's anxiety undermines his transfer interview as he reads into every gesture of his interviewer (assuming, with dismay, that he has failed) and never follows up on the exchange afterwards. And it is anxiety about what lies beyond the borders of the fort that gives him purpose later in life: he watches the desert, straining to see beyond the horizon, motivated by the fear of missing out on a battle he has been waiting his entire life for, of letting an invasion from the north sneak up on him.

Closed Drogo's anxiety ultimately feeds into his closed-off approach to life, as he never marshals this stress to act. He accepts the way things are rather than risk ruffling feathers to advocate for himself. After all, it is not Drogo who arranges for his transfer interview, but his mother: four years into his assignment (much longer than Drogo intended on staying), she is the one to intervene on his behalf, and when the interview does not go as hoped, Drogo withdraws into the comfort of the fort's routine. He does not initiate another attempt to transfer out of Fort Bastiani, and over the years, takes fewer and fewer opportunities to visit his hometown. Drogo makes no attempt to hold onto his connections to civilian life, losing touch and interest in cultivating relationships with friends or with his one-time fiancé; eventually his entire life is defined by his role at the fort, which consists of familiar and predictable routines. While he is promoted over the years due to the longevity and consistency of his service, reaching the rank of major, he does not receive any outstanding recognition. In the end, he is forced to leave the fort by a former peer who has been promoted above him and who fails to see his usefulness to the war effort. Because he is not open to new experiences or taking risks, Drogo fails to distinguish himself professionally or personally.

Ortiz

Character: Ortiz is the first officer from Fort Bastiani that Drogo encounters, meeting him on the road. At the beginning of the novel, he reveals that he has been stationed at the fort for eighteen years, now a captain in his forties. He serves as Drogo's first mentor, answering his questions about the new assignment and accompanying him on the remainder of his journey to the fort. Ortiz, like Drogo, spends his entire military career at Fort Bastiani, only to retire upon reaching old age without having ever seen war. Confident and knowledgeable, he represents Drogo's future, a once-promising military man whose career is stalled by an unimaginative fixation on glory on the edge of the frontier (no matter how remote it is).

Illustrative Moments:

Confident In their first interaction on the road to Fort Bastiani, Captain Ortiz provides the newly assigned Drogo with critical information about his new job: for example, he explains that most lieutenants volunteer for this position, serve two years, and move on. He is the one who reveals to Drogo the existence of the frontier, and the purpose behind the fort: to guard this dead frontier against an enemy who has never attacked it. He also educates Drogo on what to expect in terms of the daily routine: the quality of the food, the frequent visits from generals, and the inspections. Four years later, Ortiz urges Lieutenant Drogo to leave in pursuit of a job in the city and voices the concern that remaining at Fort Bastiani will stifle his potential. Predicting that Drogo is on a similar path to himself, Ortiz encourages his subordinate to consider alternatives. His confidence in this assessment comes from years of personal experience, and his role as mentor is one that Drogo eventually takes on himself.

Unimaginative Ortiz is an example of a soldier who has caught the "illness" that plagues many of the high-ranking officials of Fort Bastiani: he is unable to leave this dead-end assignment because he cannot admit to himself that he has wasted his time waiting for a confrontation that will never come. He is unable to imagine a fulfilling life that does not culminate in this elusive moment of glory. In his first interaction with Drogo, he remarks that while others may see Fort Bastiani as useless, it is still a frontier post and "one never knows" what can happen in such places. Upon receiving news that one of the soldiers has died during a brief exploration of the desert, Ortiz remarks that it is a "hero's death," even though the soldier died because of lack of planning on the part of his superior, not a confrontation with an enemy combatant. Ortiz's decision to elevate this meaningless death to the status of heroic sacrifice is an example of how he reframes situations to fit his unimaginative (and inaccurate) view of Fort Bastiani, on the edge of the frontier, as the place where glory can be found.

Francesco Vescovi

Character: Francesco serves a civilian contrast to Drogo. The two men have known each other for years, living together and sharing many of the same interests and companions, and Francesco's sister, Maria, is Drogo's one-time fiancé. Francesco is described as fat, having put on weight because of his relaxed life in the village, whereas Drogo is thin, his figure the result of his regimented life at the military academy. This physical difference reminds Drogo of how different the two men are now, but Francesco remains Drogo's anchor to society. He is only mentioned in the novel when Drogo leaves the fort, re-entering his friend's life after the latter takes leave to visit his childhood home. Although Francesco remains a friend to Drogo, over the years the two continue to grow apart, pursuing different paths.

Illustrative Moments:

Relaxed Francesco has none of Drogo's anxiety or stress about the future. As Drogo stewes about his impending assignment at Fort Bastiani, Francesco chats about nothing, sharing a brief anecdote about his limited experience with the fort: he saw part of it once, while hunting with his uncle. Francesco's easy-going life is reflected in his physicality: someone who hasn't done much hard labor and who has the time and money to indulge in pleasurable pursuits such as balls and parties. Later in life, Drogo reflects on the lives of his school friends who have gotten married, had children, and are settling into retirement. While he does not mention Francesco by name at this point, it is likely that he is similarly content with his life. The serves as a stark contrast to Drogo, who is still waiting for his life to mean something.

Friendly Francesco is a long-time friend of Drogo's, although by the start of the novel the two have already begun to drift apart. But he remains a gregarious companion, accompanying Drogo on the first leg of his journey to Fort Bastiani and filling the silence between them with stories that draw on their common interests and knowledge. He is also the person who welcomes Drogo back to town

when he comes home on leave. Four years into Drogo's assignment at the fort, he returns home at Ortiz's urging and renews his acquaintance with Francesco, now referred to as his "only friend" in a village that has changed so much. Francesco invites and escorts Drogo to a ball, giving his friend the opportunity to drink and dance. This evening serves as Drogo's most pleasant experience of life outside the fort.