



THE MORE BEAUTIFUL QUESTION: ALEXANDRA RICHIE (ON WRITING)

By Alexandra Richie and Michael Neiberg July 14, 2020

<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/on-writing/richie-neiberg/>

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Michael Neiberg: Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Michael Neiberg** Chair of War Studies here at the Army War College. Thanks for joining us for today's program. I am absolutely delighted today to be joined, not just by a fabulous author, but by one of my really good friends **Dr. Alexandra Richie**—probably best known for her two books *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin* and *Warsaw 1944: Hitler, Himmler and the Warsaw Uprising*. We're here in New Orleans at the end of this World War II Conference sitting in the new World War II Hotel. I can't think of a better place to sit down with a brilliant person like Alex. Alex, welcome.

Alexandra Richie: Thank you very much. It's fantastic in here.

MN: So, I want to start just by, and we've known each other a while. I know you were born in Canada.

AR: I was. Victoria.

MN: Educated in England.

AR: In Canada and England, both.

MN: In Canada and England. And with an original emphasis in the history of Germany and now you live in Warsaw.

AR: Yes.

MN: So, track us through that as an intellectual journey. Were you interested in German history from the beginning? Where did the interest in Poland come from?

AR: Always interested in German but I would say European cultural history. I grew up in a family that was very into opera and things like that which on the west coast of Canada was pretty unusual. I studied Johann Sebastian Bach when I was younger and became something of a Bach scholar although I was never good enough to be a musician. I realized this fairly early on, that I was always interested in the history of the musicians like Beethoven, Bach and how they've related to revolutions and what was happening in their societies and Bach just sort of grabbed me. So, one fine day one of my old music teachers from the Banff School of Fine Arts in Canada said to me, there's this sort of exchange thing going on with East Germany and westerners who very rarely got the chance to go into East Germany in the 80s because it was under the Communists behind the Berlin Wall said, you know this is a chance to go and see where Bach lived and worked as a young man and a musician and a composer and would you like to go? And I leapt on the chance and that was really what started my passion, interest in, not so much even Germany at that point, I was just fascinated by the fact that you had Germany, this country that was divided down the middle and there was one half that was communist and one half that was capitalist, and yet it had all come from the same place. And then Berlin was even more. That was like two halves of the same brain divided down the middle. And I was fascinated by how on Earth do you manipulate a society to think differently about its past, its history, when it's actually come from exactly the same city as it were. So, this really sparked my interest. I went to East Germany and I learned German, badly at first, and then eventually ended up going to Oxford, writing my doctorate about the manipulation of history in East and West Germany, particular emphasis on World War II. So, that's kind of how that ball got rolling.

MN: So, was it while you were in Germany that you thought to yourself, there's some things I might actually want to write about this, or did that come later?

AR: Yeah. I already knew that I wanted to. I've always wanted to be a writer, and one of the reasons I was inspired to do so was our next-door neighbor in this beautiful part of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada was an explorer of all things. He had a very interesting history because he was a first World War soldier and had gone back to Cambridge, read history and then his father got him a job at the Bank of England as one did, and he was walking down Piccadilly one day, he was bored out of his mind and he followed a guy who went into another gentlemen's outfitters on Piccadilly where they sold pith helmets and the like and the first guy was going to Canada and he said, I'm going to Canada too. So, he up-and-got some cash from Dad and went off to Canada and started exploring Northern British Columbia, the Rocky Mountains and that area and wrote books about it. So, I as a little kid would go up to his house. They would have tea, Raymond and Marigold, and he would talk about being a writer and an explorer in those early early days up in the north where he was the first guy to go up in the Haney River for example, it's a big river up in BC and things like this. So, I just thought this lifestyle was fabulous. He sat in this beautiful kind of cabin, reading these great books and then writing books and having all his friends over and I thought, yep, this is what I want to do. So, I always had this desire to be in

the creative world either writing, music, whatever combination. And that was really another thing in the back of my mind that got me interested in writing. So, when I went to East Berlin and I saw this amazing material and I knew I was going to stop any ideas of ambition to become a professional musician. I'd known that for many many years anyway. I thought, yeah, this is a good topic to write about.

MN: So, when you got to Oxford, you knew writing and history was what you were going to do.

AR: Absolutely. I already knew that history and I didn't realize at that point that I was going to want to write books the same way. I thought I'd just be an academic historian and maybe some terribly academic books would come out of it at some point, but this was something that evolved a little bit as I learned how to write better and got subjects that I thought were really interesting.

MN: Yeah, I think that happens a lot. I really thought I would write one book and then you sort of get to the sense that you might be okay at doing this. It is an evolutionary process.

AR: Absolutely. Absolutely. And it just comes out of practice and out of inspiration and all sorts of other things you don't really know where it comes from sometimes.

MN: Yeah.

AR: It's just a kind of impulse to say, I really want to do this and that's what I did.

MN: So, that explains why your first book was about Berlin, *Faust's Metropolis*, but it is a big book that starts way back in the history of Berlin and comes very much up to the present time as you were writing. So, what was inspiring your choice to say, I don't want to write just about divided Berlin or Cold War Berlin, I want to get a sense of this entire sweep of this city.

AR: Well actually, it wasn't my choice. Just after I graduated, the Berlin Wall came down and I was hired by a company called the Boston Consulting Group to go and become a consultant in what was East Germany because I was one of the only westerners who'd lived there. And then I went on into Ukraine and into Belarussia and to Russia working for them. I was happily working away based in London when I got a call from Harper Collins, Mike Fishwick from Harper Collins, and he said, I've just been talking to Tim Garton Ash who was a friend of mine at Oxford who was quite well known for writing about solidarity and the changes in the post-communist era and everything. And he said that I'd asked Tim to write a book about Berlin but he said, I don't have time but I know somebody who might want to do it, and it was just at the time when I had to make the choice as to whether or not I wanted to go back into academia or carry on in the business consulting world. And I love both, but for all sorts of personal reasons, it was a good time to switch back to academia. So, I was hired by Wilson College at Oxford, hired

by Harper Collins and under contract to write exactly the book, the whole history of Berlin. So, in a way I didn't have a choice. Had it been up to me, I probably would have done more second, first World War history, but they wanted the whole thing, so that's what came out of it.

MN: This is one of those rare books. And it's rare that a publisher comes to an author with the project. It's also rare that a publisher comes to an author that isn't yet an established best-selling, prize-winning author which you are now, but you weren't then.

AR: No, I wasn't known. It was just a recommendation from a friend.

MN: So, did you feel completely overwhelmed by this? How do I write the whole history of a city that I've lived in but I wasn't born in, wasn't raised in? Speak the language but don't have a mastery of it? What was your first reaction to all of it?

AR: Well my first reaction was, great, I'll quit my job and go do this because it'll take me a year and I'll be back... so stupid.

MN: And how long did it take you?

AR: I don't know, ten years. There was no google in those days, so you know all the research... and I never ever hired researchers or used researchers. I've learned the languages and done the work myself which is probably actually really naive and stupid but that's what I've done. So, I just really feel I then had a mastery of the subject so very naively I said, okay, no problem, I'll get this done and then get back to my teaching. And it took many years of research and hard work to get it done and of course it's a very big subject so of course it got bigger and bigger. But I really enjoyed it. I didn't feel daunted at all. That was that was not a feeling I had it all. In fact, quite the opposite, I was totally arrogant and thought, I'll just whip this out no problem. I know everything about Berlin, no problem at all. And of course, the reality, when you're halfway through or even halfway through the first chapter, hits you and you go, I've got a mountain to climb here, it's quite a lot to do. So, the reality did sort of hit. But I was very lucky because I loved being at Wilson College Oxford. It's a wonderful home and very encouraging, a very great place to write.

MN: So, how did you take a big subject like that, several centuries of the history of a city, how did you intellectually start to break it down to something you could manage?

AR: The thing that interested me about Berlin and about German history, and after all, by this point I'd lived there for quite a long time and had a lot of interaction with the place, and the big question that I was asking myself which many many people have asked themselves about Germany is, how could this place full of Bachs and Beethovens turn into this disgusting and

despicable regime in 1933-45? And what was it about the German people, the nation, the psyche, whatever else that allowed this to happen in a way? And I became fascinated with the whole subject, but I thought one good thing about being forced to write about Berlin and not about the history of Germany was that Berlin could always be the focal point, and that was very important to kind of keep tying it in. Now, I know the book is a very large thing that could kill a man at a hundred paces if you threw it at him, but the intellectual side that helped me a lot was having this sort of control on the history of Germany, and in fact, I used Berlin as a conduit to describe the history of Germany but through the lens of Berlin. That was one thing. But the real theme that that absolutely fascinated me was, how was it if you look at this long long history, particularly starting with the Prussian kings, that the Berliners, the Germans, the Prussians, seemed to be able to latch onto whichever system it is and become the best at that system and completely convinced that this is the correct thing to do whether it's the "Soldier King" and you know, 60% of the revenue of the government is going into the army, and then as Mirabeau quips, it's not a state with an army, it's an army with the state, into World War I, the most imperial power with people jumping up and down when war is declared and it's super patriotic and into Weimar, as the most loosh capital city with Marlena Dietrich and Otto Dix and all these people running around and cabaret, etcetera. And then, World War II comes along and they become the best Nazis and then after the war was fascinating because you've got—this is what started the whole interest—you've got a country divided down the middle, a city divided down the middle, and one side is becoming the best little communists you can possibly find and the other side is becoming the most successful capitalists you can possibly find. What is it about Berlin that causes this sort of incredible determination to adhere to the current ideology and with an intolerance that affects those who don't conform? And this was the basis of the book. And so, if you go through any of those eras that I mentioned and even earlier, there's this tendency. Now, one can take it too far. One can sort of bludgeon this with a sledgehammer, but actually there is a tendency throughout its history and probably Berlin is one of those cities. It's hard to think of another one that's lurched from one system, one extreme, one ideology to another with such conviction.

MN: Yeah, you could even argue today, at least in my experience, the most ardent transatlanticist multilateral people are Berliners.

AR: Yes.

MN: So, that fits with the argument of the book.

AR: Yeah, and even when I was living there at the sort of beginning of the greens, environmentalists and so on. But I remember being berated because I had bought the wrong kind of coffee. I just needed a cup of coffee and was just getting one off the street somewhere and it turned out it hadn't been... when this was just very new, it hadn't been sustainable growth coffee

or whatever it was... so people that I was interviewing in a kind of makeshift commune type place screamed at me, how could you not, how could you buy this stuff? This sounds terribly familiar. It's not about coffee. And of course, I understood their motivation and they were trying to be responsible and environmentally friendly and everything else, but I just thought this sort of in a way intolerance of how it was projected, it was part of its history, its traditions.

MN: I'm curious too about the reaction of the book inside Berlin and inside Germany because I've written on Paris and I get a lot of response from Parisians, not negative but sort of, why are you, an American, doing this? I've actually had editors say to me, who were interested in translations of the book into French, I've actually had them say to me, we're not interested in an American telling us the story. We just don't want to hear it. What was the reaction in Berlin to a Canadian British-educated person writing about Berlin?

AR: I don't really remember ever coming across that actually. Maybe it was out there but it wasn't something that I came across. What I did find and still find is when I go through Berlin now it's exactly... because it's now become such a tourist center... that I find lots of guides come up to me and say, your book was a Bible. Thank you for writing it. But these are either German guides or also foreign guides who were bringing foreigners through Berlin. But I never heard any either particularly positive or particularly negative feedback about the book. The rights were bought in Germany twice, but the book was never published, and I was just told, well it's just too long which is fair enough because it's huge so I completely bow to that. I just let it go.

MN: Before we move off of this book to your second book, can we talk for a second about how you write a book that's that big. I usually try not to write books that are that big. I think it's a function of my impatient personality. I don't want to be with the subject that long. But how did you conceive of how you were going to get your arms around such a big topic and not just thematically but the size of the book? Were you thinking about that as you were writing?

AR: No. I never expected it to be so huge actually. I never wanted it to be.

MN: The publisher didn't care? You'd come back and say, I've got another 20,000 words I want to do or 50,000 words?

AR: He was great. He was just like, do whatever, it's great stuff, just carry on. So, that was my direction. In that sense, I actually went to him and said, don't you want to cut some of this? Do we cut the early history? He said, no, this is great, just carry on. So, that was my limitation. That's really why... I think nowadays it would have been much more difficult to have something so big and cumbersome and I think it may have been very different now. But this was a long time ago.

MN: Did you write it chronologically or did you go to chapters you sort of felt you knew better?

AR: No, I wrote it chronologically.

MN: You did. You started at the start and moved forward.

AR: I started day one. I think, it sounds really, I don't mean to sound pretentious, but I think that long long long musical training and studying things like the structure of symphony or symphonies and so on, I think it trains your brain to think into certain sort of structures so you're not frightened by the fact that there's going to be a beginning, middle, end even if it's enormous. This is sort of a way of thinking I think that allows you to get a skeletal structure. I sort of thanked all my musical theory and harmony teachers much later on saying, well, actually this probably was very very good training even though it's nothing to do with music, but it gives your brain a certain way of structuring material which might have been overwhelming otherwise.

MN: It's really interesting and then your second book is also a very big book dealing with a very big and important theme, the Warsaw Uprising, but it is more compressed in time and space. You're dealing with one city over a period of a couple of weeks. Of course, there's background material and things that you're doing. Can you talk a little bit about that intellectual challenge of going from however many hundred years of Berlin history to trying to focus on the events of a very short span of time? And the two books are approximately the same length.

AR: It was exactly the same problem and intellectual challenge just in microcosm, precisely because Berlin, you've got prehistory through Middle Ages to Weimar to 1970s and beyond. In the Warsaw Uprising, you have the city, was of course taken by the Poles on the 1st of August, a large part of the city, and then taken piece by piece by the Germans. So, I had to go in a certain order and in fact about halfway through the book, I was like, well this is just sort of, it's the same but I have to keep writing because this is history and this how it happened. I had already felt by the first half of the book that I'd already pretty well covered all the things that, in the sense, I wanted to say but in the interest of it being historically accurate and an absolute mirror to the events that happened in the city, I had to keep going and finish up. The interesting thing was that each district of the city was taken in a completely different way, so it was almost like you moved from Weimar into World War II. It was as structured as that. In a way, both books, my structure was given to me already and so I had to fill in the blanks in the Warsaw book as well. Yes, the focus is quite different, but the structure was very similar, intellectually I mean.

MN: Were you looking for a grand narrative? Were you looking for one big question? It's kind of a trick question. I've read the book, I think I know what you're going to say but for the purpose of the podcast, I want to see if I am wrong.

AR: The big question in this book was why when the war was almost lost in August 1944 did the Germans feel the need to come back and murder most of the inhabitants or imprison them or send them to camps and totally and utterly destroy the city. What was the point? So many books about the Warsaw Uprising and about Poland during World War II have to do with the Soviets. Why did the Soviets not come to our aid? Why did the Soviets take us over afterwards and oppose this communist system? My focus was very much more on what the Germans had done. This was a logical conclusion because of course I read German, I had studied a lot about German World War II history by this point and very interested in the crimes that were committed in Central and Eastern Europe during World War II. It was a sort of a natural extension of that. Why did the Germans come back and do this? What was their motivation? And then of course one looks at the details, the people involved, the orders that were given and so on. That was in a way the big overarching question. Did I get it right? [laughter].

MN: Close. I think [laughter]. I was also thinking more that Warsaw gets a treatment that no other city... Other cities are certainly destroyed, other cities certainly go through horrible horrible... but no other city is, as you said, deliberately, block by block, for what seems to be no strategic operational, no reason to do it.

AR: None. None.

MN: That's an intellectual problem of course. Now you live in Warsaw and were living in Warsaw I assume when you were working on the book.

AR: Yes.

MN: The city is, for those who haven't been there, if you can see it with Alex, I highly recommend it...

AR: Always welcome.

MN: But you can see where there was an old city and now there is a new city. It's not like you are walking through London where you can say, well that building looks like something built in the late forties. I mean the entire city has to be reconstructed.

AR: Yes.

MN: So again, that question of, the very city in which you are living, you're trying to understand what it is that you're walking around.

AR: I was lucky because I first went to Warsaw in 1986 so this was still under the communists and very little had been done to renovate the city except for the big Soviet set pieces like the Palace of Culture and some of the big boulevards that Stalin remodeled, and he did the same in East Berlin and other places too. The Palace of Culture is modeled on the Seven Sisters in Moscow, so very much a kind of Soviet control, here we are. Most of the rest of the outskirts of the city had basically been ignored or very ugly, Brezhnevian, prefab concrete blocks had been hastily put up, so people had a place to live. Because as you said, the city was basically flattened otherwise. And so, there were lots and lots of kind of places in the city where buildings were half destroyed, or you could see the remnants of the war still. That's pretty well all gone now because Warsaw has grown so quickly since the collapse of Communism that almost all those traces have disappeared. You see it when you go outside of Warsaw a little bit but basically the city itself is now like a phoenix rising from the ashes kind of thing. And you see this very interesting intermingling with Prague on the East Bank which has still old buildings, old factories and so on. It was always a working-class district with the tenements that look, it could have been old Berlin, it could have been old Petersburg. And then on the western side, you've got what was the ghetto just a whole sea of these Brezhnevian, prefab blocks. The center with these big Stalinist set pieces and then all dotted in throughout there now, these new modern office buildings and apartment buildings that have come up since 1989. It's a fascinating patchwork quilt of architectural history and therefore the layers that you can sort of unfold through architecture, it's really amazing actually.

MN: So, let me ask you the same question I asked about Berlin. Has your book been received in Warsaw? Does it get much attention? Has it been translated into Polish?

AR: It's translated into Polish. In fact, it became a number one best-selling book in Warsaw, in Poland.

MN: The reception was obviously positive.

AR: It was really really good and even for a nonfiction book, it was the best-selling book for a short time in Poland which is amazing. The Warsaw Uprising has become almost kind of cultish. It's such a big topic now and has become a kind of controversial and very interesting, but anyway, people like the book and I think one of the reasons was, first of all, there was an awful lot of original research interviews and talking to the people themselves and voices talking about their interactions particularly with the Germans. I didn't dwell on this endlessly repeated topic of why did the Soviets stay on the Eastern back. I mention it but I wanted to put the Warsaw Uprising and the decision to start the uprising in the context of the Second World War as it was seen primarily from the German perspective, Bagration, them being pushed backwards, the attempted assassination on Hitler, of Walter Model's counteroffensive which takes place just at Jaktori on the outskirts of Warsaw. These things fascinated me and so, with all this happening,

why did the Germans do what they did and come back as you say and lash out against the people? I think that it was a refreshing and different perspective for many Poles.

MN: You had what the Army War College calls... you had the more beautiful question in mind. You had the thing that was kind of guiding the research and guiding the writing.

AR: Yes.

MN: To me that's the absolute key. When I'm having writer's block, it's normally because I don't know what that question of that particular part of a book is going to be.

AR: Yeah, you've got to have that in your mind that sort of guides you through and it also, I say this ironically because it looks hilarious, at least thousands of pages, but it also gives you the guidance as to what not to write about. If you've got that main question, you say, I could have done all sorts of things about the Soviets or all sorts of things about other cities being treated this way. No, we have to stick with the main theme otherwise you can get lost and if you start to get lost then you get panicky, and if you get panicky, you give up or you do another project or something and that's always a problem. So, for writers I think especially writers of history, if you've got that big concept in your mind, then you can carry it through to the end.

MN: The other thing that you have that comes through in your books, it certainly comes through when I'm walking with you in Poland is the passion you have for explaining this to people who may not have thought very much about Poland which I confess I was one until I came to Warsaw. So, that comes through quite clearly in the way that, I don't say it's missionary like, but it's certainly proselytizing in the way that you want people to understand not just contemporary Poland but what Poland means in the grand sweep of not just one World War but two and the Russo-Polish war that takes place. So, as I'm watching the sand begin to come out of the hourglass, when you and I were in Poland, we were talking about a project you are interested in, in the German mindset at the end of World War I and how this might explain Germany's road to the Second World War. I wonder if you might talk just a little bit about what that is and kind of where your thinking is.

AR: Yeah, that's the next big book, although I'll try and keep it a little smaller this time, but again the idea is to look at the legacy of World War I and the fact that the borders between Poland and the East were unfinished or undecided so that it was an open question hence the 1920s War. I'm fascinated by the Germans who at the end of World War I after Brest-Litovsk almost thought of themselves as settlers in these new lands and began to even till the soil and bring in the harvest kind of thing. They were in shock when they were told that they were actually having to go back to Berlin or Dusseldorf or wherever they were from because they had, now, quite a nice idea that this would be nice Lebensraum sort of place. I'm looking very much

at how those guys and particularly, for example, people like Rosenberg and some of the other SS ideologists who were on the Eastern Front in that context come back and propagate the stab-in-the-back myth, the idea you need Lebensraum and so on and how they try to intellectualize it, how they try and put it into the Nazi ideology which of course it becomes. It becomes such an important fundamental part of what Hitler is trying to do, what Himmler is trying to do later on in the Second World War. And the idea that permeates the Nazi mind is that we deserve, have the right to, and have already been in these lands and we're going to make them better, we're going to cleanse them of these horrible Jews and horrible Slavs and Germanize them and make them into this sort of wonderful paradise. But of course, paradise in the Nazi eyes is a paradise that can't have Jews in it, and it can have only a few Slavs to take out the washing and feed the animals. That's kind of their thought.

MN: So, among the many things I love about this project: a) I think you're dead right that in order to understand this, we have to think about those Germans who believe, hey, we did win in the East. The defeat was somewhere else. It wasn't where we were standing. And of course as you and I have talked in Warsaw of being able to link the events of 1914 through to 1945 and beyond that this really is kind of one arc of history and that the Second World War is fought by men who have vivid, clear memories, recollections, constructions, whatever one might want to call them, about what happened during the first.

AR: Yes, absolutely. And the thing is it's not just true of Poland, but you look at that whole region, as I said, the border of Poland. In the West you've got the Treaty of Versailles, thank you sign, sealed and delivered, these are the borders, this is what's going to happen and everybody kind of goes home, the Germans are grumpy, everybody else is, you know, economically not doing well but, okay, we've got our borders. That's not true of Central Europe. You've got all the problems with the Soviets, with the Baltic states, with Belarussia and Ukraine, the conflicts and issues between Poland and Czechoslovakia, all these things are going on and they're not resolved. The Second World War and Hitler's war in a way temporarily resolves some of these things but the mindset and the ideological conflicts are there, underlying these bigger conflicts under Nazism, are simmering away the whole time. I want to try and tease those out and explore them. Of course, Poland is my focus but overarching that is the conflict between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

MN: Again, what I love about that is it gets us beyond just thinking of 1939/45 as a kind of parenthesis and sets it in a much wider anvil. We are almost out of time, so I want to ask you, you're going to get back on the plane tomorrow or the day after and go back to Europe, what are you reading? What will you read on that flight? What's on your bed stand? What are you reading?

AR: Well, right now I mean it's slightly unfair because I'm reading only stuff, research materials for my books but when I want to give up on that stuff actually, it's related of course, I'm right now in the project of going through, especially the old Russian Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Russian novelists, getting me back in that feeling of the Russian mindset. So, it's very important to understand the ideology, the philosophy, the cultural touchstones, even though the revolution swept a lot of those things away, a lot of them were preserved so I'm going into that Russian mindset at the moment. I'm afraid it's the idiot. It sounds terribly pretentious but that's kind of the idea right now.

MN: Well that's where your mind is, that's where your reading should be. Well, Alex, I can't thank you enough. I learned so much from you being in Warsaw. I learned so much from you about Poland and about Eastern Europe and I'm just delighted we had this chance to talk.

AR: Brilliant. Thank you so much for having me.

MN: See you in Warsaw.

AR: Yep, absolutely.