

THE WRITTEN WORD

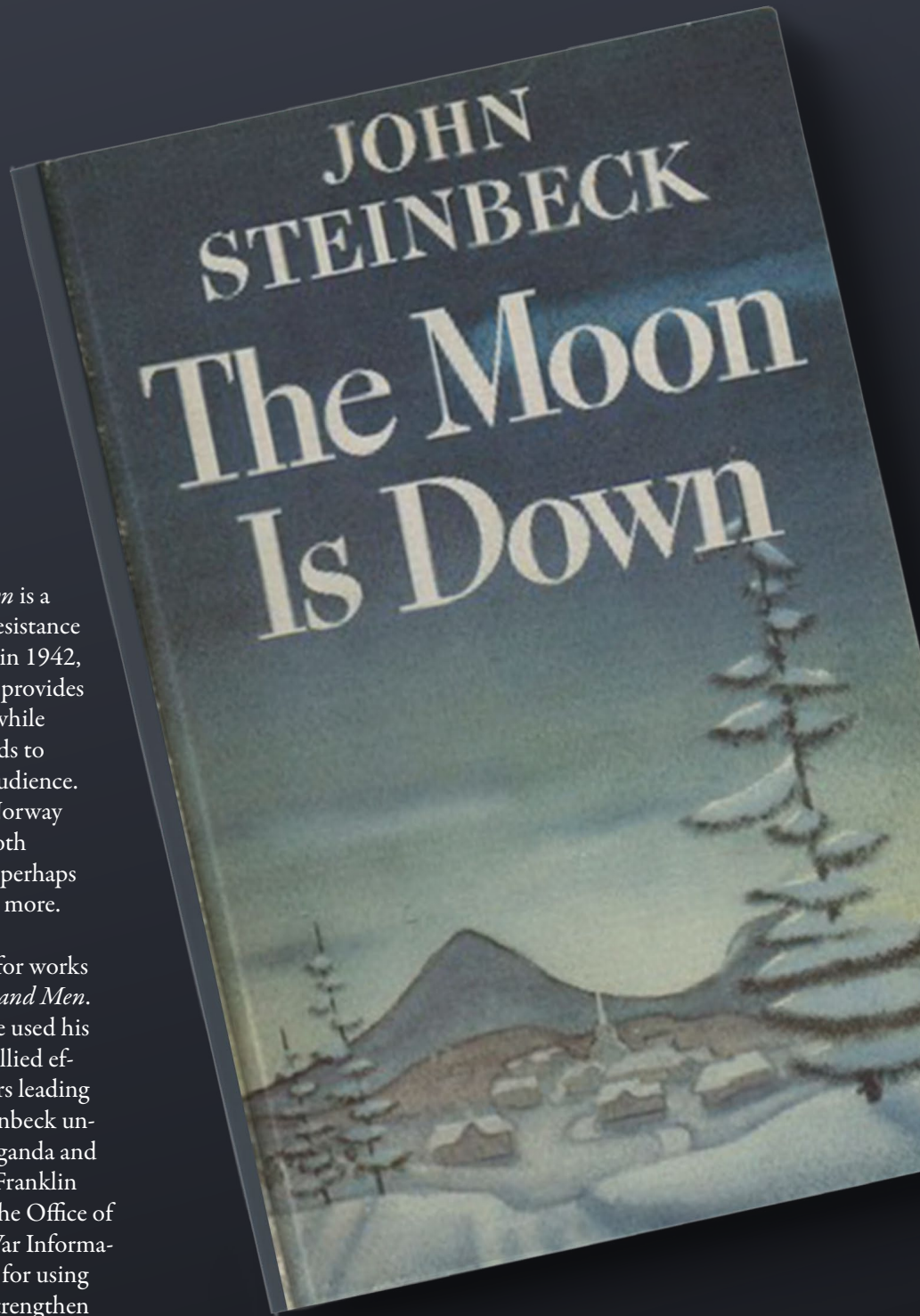
The Moon is Down

by John Steinbeck

*Reviewed by MAJ Caleb Edwards,
US Army Special Forces*

John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* is a "meta" example of motivating a resistance movement. Originally published in 1942, this novel of invasion and occupation provides instruction for resistance techniques while leveraging cunning translation methods to encourage mobilization amongst its audience. Distributed as a propaganda tool in Norway in 1942, this short 114-page read is both entertaining and informative. It ends, perhaps intentionally, with the reader wanting more.

Steinbeck became a household name for works like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. Less well known is the story of how he used his skills to produce propaganda for the allied efforts during World War II. In the years leading up to US involvement in the war, Steinbeck unsuccessfully presented ideas for propaganda and misinformation directly to President Franklin Roosevelt. It was not until he joined the Office of Strategic Services and the Office of War Information that he materialized his concepts for using written works, such as this novel, to strengthen Europeans' resistance against the Nazi occupying forces. In 1942, after befriending refugees from Nazi-occupied territories, Steinbeck wrote *The Moon is Down* to "encourage resistance in victim nations."¹



▲ New York: Penguin Classics, 1995

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112 pages

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The book tells the story of a small coastal town’s struggle against an invading and occupying force. The town lies within an unnamed country with characteristics reminiscent of Norway, Denmark, and France. Though never identified explicitly, the invaders represent Nazi Germany. Their objective is to maintain the city’s coal mining operations to support the broader war effort. While the occupation meets little overt resistance, the townspeople do not capitulate to the new martial government. As tensions between resident and occupier grow, the book follows a nascent resistance movement and its eventual transition to guerrilla warfare. The reader learns about resistance milestones, catalyst events, and associated resistance nuances through a series of relatable scenarios. Steinbeck speaks directly to the reader, through character dialogue, as a means to both instruct and encourage resistance. Here he offers a lesson on the importance of a decentralized approach, as Dr. Winter speaks to Mayor Orden, the story’s hero: “They think that just because they have only one leader and one head, we are all like that. They know that ten heads lopped off will destroy them, but we are a free people; we have as many heads as we have people, and in a time of need leaders pop up among us like mushrooms.”²

Later in the text, Steinbeck encourages resistance as “free men,” through the voice of Mayor Orden: “The people don’t like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not be. Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars. You will find that is so, sir.”³

The invader’s authoritarian rules, cultural insensitivity, and overly centralized decision-making process ultimately cause the resistance to escalate into violence. While the book is intended to inform and encourage resistance, Steinbeck’s descriptions of the invader’s failures can be useful for the study and execution of counterinsurgency strategies.

In true Steinbeck style, *The Moon is Down* relies on brevity to encourage the reader to fill in absent details. The story follows the incipient phases of the resistance, and abruptly ends as the resistance prepares for the transition to guerrilla warfare. If the book is read solely for entertainment, the reader may be left with the feeling that the story is incomplete. Perhaps Steinbeck’s goal was to provide his readers in the occupied areas with a starter package of resistance tools and inspire them to finish the story through actions applied to their own circumstances. Toward that end, Steinbeck has a good deal of concrete advice about resistance and insurgency. Throughout the novel, he introduces resistance techniques that are as applicable to current events as they were in 1942. In the story, for example, townspeople properly utilize tradecraft to arrange clandestine meetings and organize an effort to contact and request support from England.⁴ He

also illustrates lessons in supporting resistance by having British warplanes airdrop packages to assist in the town’s disruption efforts. The packages, wrapped in blue paper for easy identification, contain sticks of dynamite, a time fuse, a bar of chocolate, and an instructional sheet on how to use the dynamite against designated infrastructure targets. The bar of chocolate provided added motivation for the



townspeople to scour the countryside in search of the packages.⁵

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Dialogue between Mayor Orden and Colonel Lanser, commander of the occupying force, reveals much about the complicated dynamic of humans in war. Early in the story, Colonel Lanser attempts to convince Mayor Orden to sentence a town citizen to death:

[Orden] said, “You wish me to pass sentence of death on Alexander Morden after a trial here?”

“Yes, and you will prevent much bloodshed later if you will do it.”

Orden went to the table. . . . “You and your government do not understand. In all the world yours is the only government and people with a record of defeat after defeat for centuries and every time because you did not understand people. . . . I have no right to pass sentence of death. There is no one in this community with that right. If I should do it, I would be breaking the law as much as you.”

“Breaking the law?” said Lanser.

“You killed six men when you came in. Under our law you are guilty of murder, all of you. Why do you go into this nonsense of law, Colonel? There is no law between you and us. This is war. Don’t you know you will have to kill all of us or we in time will kill all of you? You destroyed the law when you came in, and a new law took its place. Don’t you know that?”

. . . “The military, the political pattern I work in has certain tendencies and practices which are invariable.”

Orden said, “And these tendencies and practices have been proven wrong in every single case since the beginning of the world.”⁶

Readers who understand US insurgency and counterinsurgency doctrine will be reminded of similar, less artistically presented, rhetoric in FM 3-24 and the *Comprehensive Defence Handbook*.⁷

The Moon is Down was a practical instrument of insurgency. The Norwegian version of the text manipulates acceptable translation rules to align the environment more closely with that of the target audience, while converting rather neutrally descriptive terms into something more seditious. For example, where the source text refers to the invading soldiers as “men,” the Norwegian translation uses the



word *fremmede*, which literally means “strangers.”⁸ This translation technique is a deliberate attempt to reinforce the psychological framework of “us versus them.” More subtle techniques involve adjusting descriptions to align them more closely with the reader’s culture. For example, the original English text describes a shooting competition in a “glade.” While the most direct translation is *lysning*, the Norwegian text uses *setervoll*, which is uniquely descriptive of terrain associated with Norwegian farming and culture.⁹ The Norwegian text also relies on menacing translations to drive a psychological wedge between the reader and the Nazis. When Colonel Lancer appeals for the town’s people to “get along” with the invaders, “get along”—meaning essentially to tolerate—is translated to *avfinne seg med*, meaning to “tolerate against your wish.”¹⁰ Other creative translations aim to encourage the reader. When the invaders discuss the status of their “replacements,” the Norwegian translation uses the word *forsterkninger*. *Forsterkninger* is not a direct translation and is closer to “reinforcements.” This purposeful shift in meaning is meant to indicate that the resistance is exhausting the invaders and that there is hope in opposition.¹¹

The book, though successful, received criticism in the United States for not demonizing the Nazi enemy to the degree seen in other pieces of US propaganda. But Steinbeck’s humanization of the invaders was intentional. After speaking with refugees from Nazi-occupied countries, he determined that assigning relatable qualities to the characters provided realism to his story and reduced the risk that it might be disregarded as hyperbolic propaganda.¹² After the war, Steinbeck was awarded the Haakon VII Freedom Cross, one of Norway’s highest honors, for his work.¹³

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While the book was originally intended for distribution to those living in Nazi-occupied territories, it remains relevant and purposeful today. This timeless approach to informing and motivating resistance techniques could be aptly applied in both Eastern Europe and Asia today. The *Comprehensive Defence Handbook* and *Resistance Operating Concept* serve as military references for hardening cultures against an occupying force.¹⁴ However, artistic renderings of those principles, as accomplished in *The Moon is Down*,

use storytelling at its best to inculcate the psychological framework for resistance in vulnerable populations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAJ Caleb J. Edwards is an Army Special Forces officer.

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NOTES

1. Donald V. Coers, *John Steinbeck Goes to War: The Moon is Down as Propaganda* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 4–12.
2. John Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 105.
3. *Ibid.*, 111.
4. *Ibid.*, 70–86.
5. *Ibid.*, 87–103.
6. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
7. Department of the Army, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2014); NATO, *Comprehensive Defence Handbook* (Shape, Belgium: NATO Special Operations Headquarters, 2020).
8. Merete Ruud, “Translation and War: Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* and *Natt uten måne*” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2010), 35.
9. *Ibid.*, 17.
10. *Ibid.*, 40.
11. *Ibid.*, 45.
12. Charles Edel, “President Zelensky’s Leadership of Ukraine’s Resistance is a Testament to Democracy,” *Washington Post*, 1 March 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/01/president-zelenskys-leadership-ukraines-resistance-is-testament-democracy/>
13. Adam Nettina, “How John Steinbeck Inspired the Resistance in WWII,” HistoryNet, 17 November 2021: <https://www.historynet.com/how-john-steinbeck-inspired-the-resistance-in-wwii/>
14. NATO, *Comprehensive Defence Handbook*; Otto C. Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2020).