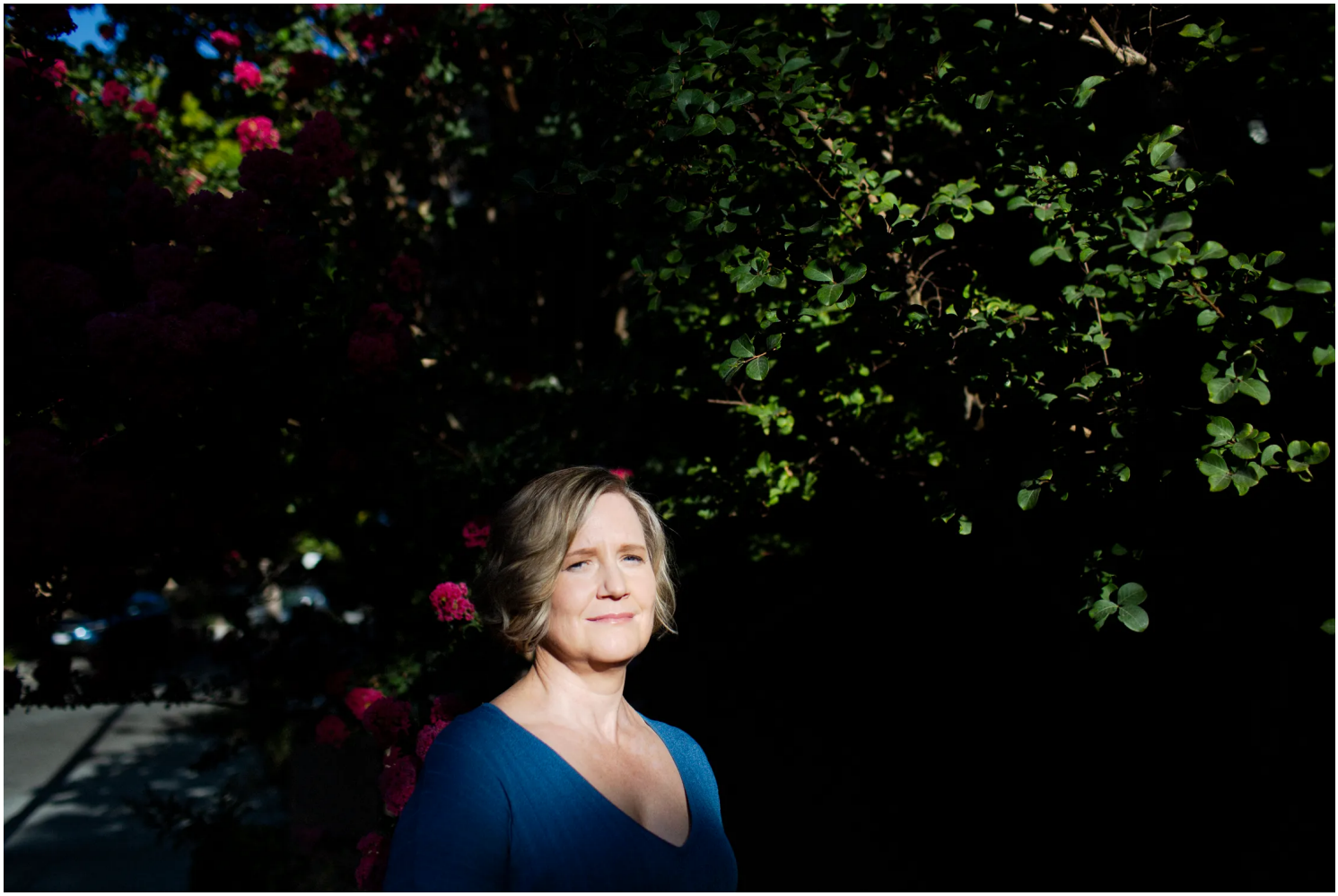

Ksenia Coffman in her neighborhood in San Jose, California. PHOTOGRAPH: TALIA HERMAN

NOAM COHEN BACKCHANNEL SEP 7, 2021 7:00 AM

One Woman's Mission to Rewrite Nazi History on Wikipedia

Ksenia Coffman's fellow editors have called her a vandal and a McCarthyist. She just wants them to stop glorifying fascists—and start citing better sources.

SAVE

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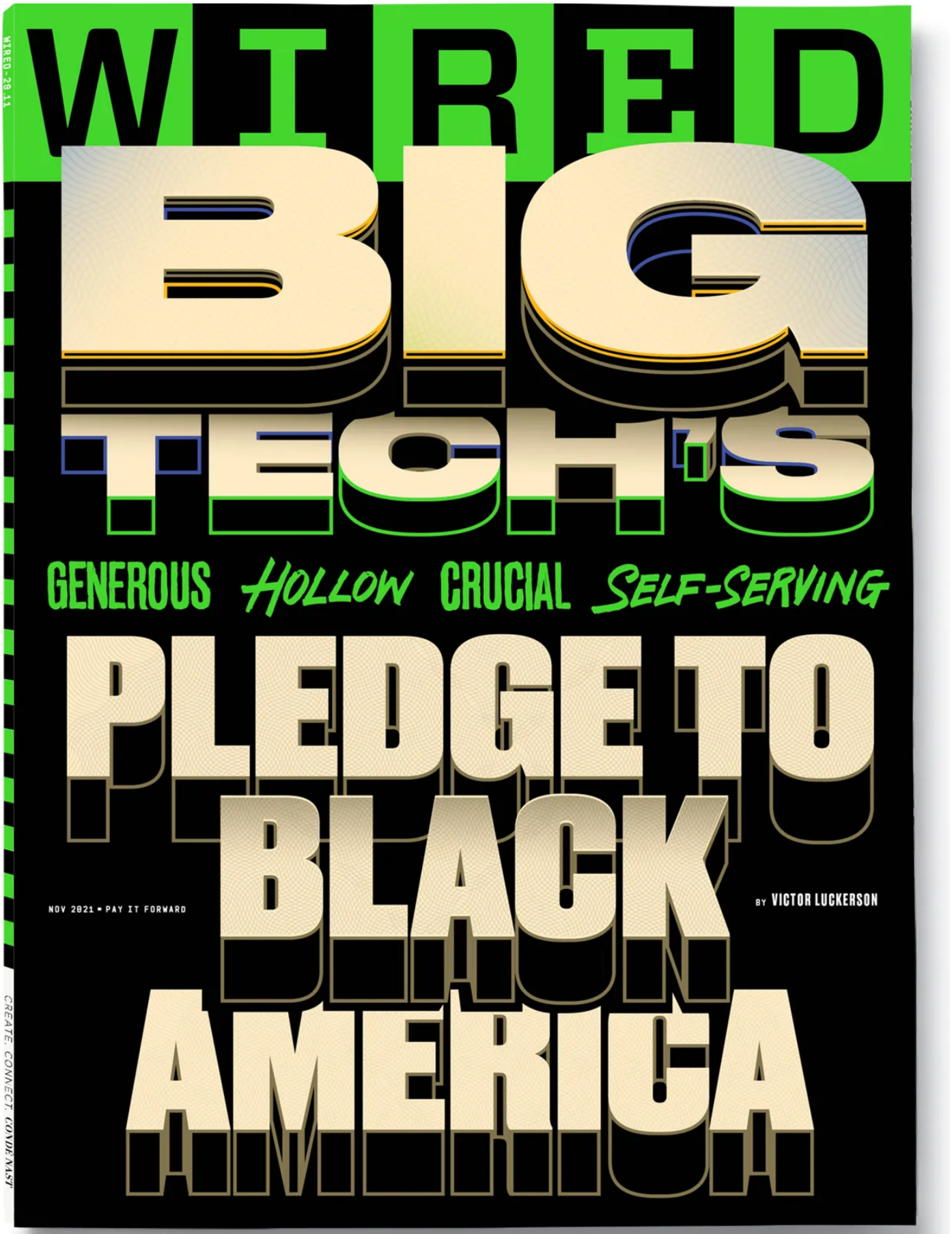
WHEN KSENIA COFFMAN started editing Wikipedia, she was like a tourist in Buenos Aires in the 1950s. She came to learn the tango, admire the architecture, sip maté. She didn't know there was a Nazi problem. But Coffman, who was born in Soviet-era Russia and lives in Silicon Valley, is an intensely observant traveler. As she link-hopped through articles about the Second World War, one of her favorite subjects, she saw what seemed like a concerted effort to look the other way about Germany's wartime atrocities.

Coffman can't recall exactly when her concern set in. Maybe it was when she read the article about the SS, the Nazi Party's paramilitary, which included images that felt to her like glamour shots—action-man officers admiring maps, going on parade, all sorts of "very visually disturbing" stuff. Or maybe it was when she clicked through some of the pages about German tank gunners, flying aces, and medal winners. There were hundreds of them, and the men's impressive kill counts and youthful derring-do always seemed to exist outside the genocidal Nazi cause. What was going on here? Wikipedia was supposed to be all about consensus. Wasn't there consensus on, you know, Hitler?



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A typical person might have thought, *Something is wrong on the internet again. What a bummer. Next tab.* But Coffman is the person who finishes the thousand-page Holocaust novel. Whatever she chooses to spend her time on—powerlifting, fragrance collecting, denazification—she approaches the assignment like a straight-A student. You can time-travel back and watch her begin. Wikipedia never forgets; it keeps a permanent public record of every change an editor makes.

In early November 2015, you will find K.e.coffman in "20 July plot," an article about the failed plan by German officers to assassinate Hitler. A sentence has jumped out at her. It says that some of the conspirators came to see the plot as "a grand, if futile gesture" that would save "the honour of themselves, their families, the army and Germany." The claim isn't supported by any sources. It's conjecture, hearsay. And to her it seems strangely flattering.

Coffman navigates over to the Wikipedia article about one of the conspirators—Arthur Nebe, a high-ranking member of the SS. Apart from his role in the plot, Nebe's main claim to notability is that he came up with the idea of turning vans into mobile gas chambers by piping in exhaust fumes. The article acknowledges both of these facts, along with the detail that Nebe tested his system on the mentally ill. But it also says that he worked to "reduce the atrocities committed," going so far as to give his bloodthirsty superiors inflated death totals.

Coffman will recall that she feels "totally disoriented." She cannot believe that an innovator in mass murder would have tried to *protect* the Jews and other supposed subhumans his troops rounded up. She checks the footnotes. The claim is attributed to *War of Extermination*, a compendium of academic essays originally published in 1995.

Coffman knows the book is legit, because she happens to have a copy on loan from the library. When she goes to the cited page, she finds a paragraph that appears to confirm all the Wikipedia article's wild claims. But then she reads the first sentence of the next paragraph: "This is, of course, nonsense."

The level of bad faith is eye-opening for Coffman. She is "very appalled." She sees that her confidence in Wikipedia was "very much misplaced." All it takes to warp historical memory, she realizes, is something this small, achievable for almost anyone with a keyboard. "So few people can have so much impact, it's a little scary,"

she says. She begins to turn a more critical eye to what she sees on Wikipedia. Especially the footnotes.

In a long spree of edits, Coffman cleans up the two articles. She goes to the Talk page for "20 July plot," where editors debate changes to the main article. She copy-pastes the language about the grand, futile gesture. "I would like to remove this part," she writes. "Thoughts? Objections?" Another editor voices support. With a click, the paragraph is gone.

In the Nebe article, Coffman adds a "[citation needed]" tag to the flagrantly false claim. She identifies two more dubious sources—one misleadingly quoted, one potentially invented. She checks out a book called *The SS: Alibi of a Nation* to make sure. Over and over again, she reworks Nebe's legacy: At first, it's that some historians "have a much harsher view" of him than others. Then it's that they "have a less generous view." Then it's "Historians have a negative view of Nebe and his motivations, despite his participation in the 20 July plot." Coffman is beginning to understand that history is an edit war. Truth, factual and moral, hangs in the balance.

Similar battles over how to remember the past have been raging across society. Do we let the old bronze statues stand in our boulevards, or do we put them in a museum someplace, or do we melt them down? Can there be a "hero" who fought for a morally rotten cause? Are qualities like valor and self-sacrifice and tactical brilliance worth admiring anywhere they occur, even if, say, racial supremacism is there too? Some choose to take to the streets. Coffman fights on the terrain most familiar to her, with the weapons she knows best. Not that she would put it that way; she's not big on war metaphors.

Coffman at home. PHOTOGRAPH: TALIA HERMAN

Several weeks into her new obsession, Coffman realizes that she's supposed to fill out her User page—the Wikipedia equivalent of a profile, where editors broadcast opinions, grudges, achievements, pet peeves. One Saturday night she updates it for the first time. "I'm a new editor to Wikipedia," she writes. "I enjoy contributing and engaging with other editors."

An hour later, past midnight, she adds: "My editing style tends to be bold."

COFFMAN WAS RAISED by engineers in the waning days of the Soviet Union. She had what she describes as a "culturally privileged upbringing" in Moscow. She went to galleries, museums, the theater. In her neighborhood, she remembers fondly, there was a recycling kiosk that rewarded you with literature. "For this number of kilos of paper you could get these books," she says. "Classics: Pushkin, Tolstoy. Reading was encouraged."

She wasn't taught to romanticize the war. "The martial qualities of the veterans were never celebrated," Coffman says. "It wasn't about the glorious victories, fighters zooming down on enemy ships." Her grandfather, a soil scientist, served in the Red Army as a combat engineer and survived the assault on Leningrad. But in typical fashion, she says, she heard next to nothing about his experiences when she was kid. (For the first time, in response to questions for this article, Coffman asked her father what he knew. She reported back that at one point her grandfather had considered suicide. "The only thing that prevented him from doing this was the thought that he had to get back to his wife and kids," she wrote.)

At university, Coffman majored in computational linguistics, a field that combined her interests in language and science. She was a top student and won a scholarship for business school in the Bay Area. She arrived during the dotcom boom and never left. "When I moved to the US, I didn't have this idea of the shining beacon of democracy," she says. But at least she could feel safe. "I would walk down the street and the police officer wouldn't assault me or ask me for a bribe."

Coffman, who has broad shoulders under a bob of blond hair, thinks and talks deliberately. She lives in a compact townhouse in a planned community in San Jose, California. The museums and galleries are harder to get to now ("I have to drive to San Francisco, find parking"), but she keeps stimulated with books, hobbies, and books about her hobbies. When I visited her at home earlier this year, she walked me past the weight-lifting setup on the ground floor. (She read *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training* for that one. She approves of the book because it's "like a science manual.") Upstairs, I recognized the tall, narrow bookshelf that appears behind her during Zoom calls. It contains dozens of titles that wouldn't look out of place in a history grad student's apartment—*Hitler's Generals on Trial. Kiev: 1941. Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying*. A few others, like *In the Company of Women*, nod to a career in business.

Ksenia Coffman's bookshelf in her San Jose home. PHOTOGRAPH: TALIA HERMAN

The Second World War is where Coffman feels most comfortable, but in 2015, she says, she got interested in the US Civil War. That summer, a young white supremacist murdered nine congregants at a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooting made her realize, she says, that "there was all this other America" that lay beyond her experience—a place deeply scarred by a past she barely understood.

So Coffman did what she always did: She read. And because she happened to be between jobs, she was free to immerse herself in history for long stretches. She learned about the Civil War, the conflict behind so much of the turmoil in the United States. She read about "lost cause" ideology, which claims the Confederacy actually fought to preserve high-minded Southern ideals, not specifically the institution of slavery. She brushed up on her knowledge of the Second World War, a struggle more familiar to her.

Maybe the lack of a job, of people to collaborate with, is also what made Wikipedia seem like an attractive pastime. That's what it was supposed to be: another hobby. At first, Coffman stuck to tentative, sporadic suggestions. But then she was making edits nearly every day; there was so much to fix. She liked the site's intricate bureaucracy—the guidelines on etiquette and reliable sourcing, the policies on dispute resolution and article deletion, the learned essays and discussion pages that editors cite like case law. "Wikipedia is very regimented," she says. "I am good with instructions."

"G'DAY," PEACEMAKER67 BEGINS his note for K.e. coffman. It's late 2015, and he is concerned about recent changes to an article on Wikipedia ("WP" for short) about an SS tank division made up of Nordic Nazi volunteers. "Sorry but there appears to be some sort of misunderstanding about what should be deleted on WP, and I just want to clarify it before this gets too far down the track."

Coffman recognizes this editor's handle. He's Australian, and his User page says he served as a peacekeeper in the former Yugoslavia. He is the same person who invited her to join WikiProject Military History, a group where editors can chat, take classes, win plaudits, and work on articles together.

IDEAS

The Shaky Ground Truths of Wikipedia

KC COLE

[EDIT]

Wikipedia Is the Last Best Place on the Internet

RICHARD COOKE

BACKCHANNEL

The Cold War's Most Daring Disinformation Campaign

THOMAS RID

Not for the first time, Coffman has been removing material from the article about the tank division. She thinks it's full of unsourced fancruft, the Wikipedia word for fawning, excessively detailed descriptions that appeal to a tiny niche of readers—in this case, those thrilled by accounts of battle. The article tells how "the division acquitted itself well" even against "stiffening resistance," how it "held the line" and earned the "grudging respect" of skeptical commanders. One contributor has used the eyebrow-raising phrase "baptism of fire." It's as if the editors don't see the part lower down the page where a soldier uses the phrase "and then we cleaned a Jew hole."

The glorifying language, Coffman thinks, is a clear sign that this is historical fan fiction. It elides the horrors of war. If editors want such details to stay on the page, at a minimum they should use a better source than Axis History, a blog whose motto is "Information not shared is lost."

The interaction starts out politely enough. "IMHO it is good that you are deleting citations from unreliable bloggy sources," Peacemaker67 says. "But just because material is sourced to them doesn't mean it is wrong."

K.e.coffman replies in less than an hour. “Thank you for your note,” she writes. “Yes, I was surprised about how little I was able to salvage as I was editing the article.” She lists 17 bullet-pointed examples of biased language, Nazi glorification, and unreliable claims. “Would Wikipedia not be *better* without such content?” she asks.

“Well, people are on WP for different reasons,” Peacemaker67 replies. “I don’t go around deleting stuff because I think it might be dodgy.” He cites a page that counsels gradualism in editing, because Wikipedia is a work in progress. “Articles have long histories, and there is no WP:DEADLINE,” he says.

Coffman cites a different doctrine in response. “I’m of the view that there’s indeed a deadline: Wikipedia:The deadline is now,” she writes. “Why perpetuate misinformation when it can be removed, or give legitimacy to glorification while there are already plenty of sites that do that? I believe Wikipedia’s standards to be higher.”

Peacemaker67’s final response, nine minutes later, is curt: “If you take this sort of action on articles on my watchlist, expect to be reverted and asked to provide reliable sources that contradict what is in the article.”

Like other editors whom Coffman will encounter, Peacemaker67 sees something pernicious in her work. In a recent email, he told me that he considers Coffman’s approach “most unencyclopaedic and a prime example of what Wikipedia is not (see WP:NOTCENSORED).” He went on: “Will we apply the same censorship to military

history articles on units of the Khmer Rouge? Turkish military units involved in the Armenian Genocide? Rwandan military units involved in the genocide in that country? US cavalry units that massacred Native Americans? Arkan's Tigers? Where does that end?"

Coffman finds her next target in the footnotes of the article about the tank division. This one's name is Franz Kurowski, and he seems to pop up all over the place. Kurowski served in the Luftwaffe. After the war, he tried his hand at all sorts of popular writing, often with a pseudonym to match: Jason Meeker and Slade Cassidy for his crime fiction and westerns, Johanna Schulz and Gloria Mellina for his chick lit. But his accounts of the Second World War made him famous under his own name. Kurowski's stories weren't subtle. As the German historian Roman Töppel writes in a critical essay: "They depict war as a test of fate and partly as adventure. German war crimes are left out—much unlike allied war crimes."

To understand this dubious chronicler better, Coffman goes to Google, where she comes upon a book called *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. It describes how, in the immediate aftermath of the war, characters like Kurowski worked to rehabilitate the image of the German army—to argue that a few genocidal apples had spoiled the barrel. With a guy like Hitler to pin the blame on, the rest was easy. The so-called "myth of the clean Wehrmacht" took root on both sides of the Atlantic: German

society needed to believe that not everyone who wore a gray uniform was evil, and the Americans were courting every anti-Communist ally they could find. Then, in the mid-1990s, a museum exhibit cataloging the crimes of the Nazi-era military traveled throughout Germany. An odd situation emerged: Germans began to speak more honestly about the Wehrmacht than non-Germans did.

When Coffman reads this, something clicks. She is dealing with a poisonous tree here. She shouldn't be throwing out individual pieces of fruit. She should be chopping it off at the trunk. She starts to pivot from history (the facts themselves) to historiography (the way they're gathered). She begins to use Wikipedia to document the false historical narrative, and its purveyors, and then make the fight about dubious sources rather than specific articles.
On Christmas Eve, she returns to Arthur Nebe's page and makes a one-word addition: "Historians have a *uniformly* negative view of Nebe and his motives."

IN THE SPRING of 2016, Coffman goes through hundreds of articles about the winners of various Nazi medals, including one called the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. She removes biased sources and any information based on those sources. When she is done, typically, there is nothing left to the article—nothing to say about the person—other than the fact that he won an award. She then insists that an award isn't reason enough for a stand-alone Wikipedia article. Without a reliable source telling your life story, you can't be notable. Poof. Another Nazi legend bites the dust.

A particularly revered medal winner, or a high-ranking one, might survive Coffman's purge. But the results aren't pretty. When she arrives at Kurt Knispel's page, it says that he was "one of the, if not the, greatest tank ace of all time." His photo shows a young gunner with shaggy blond hair and a goatee. He flashes a smile, unaware that he is doomed.

Unfortunately for Knispel, his reputation rests almost entirely on stories told by Kurowski, as well as an account in the *Wehrmachtbericht*, the Nazi propaganda broadcast. Coffman strips away the apocryphal stories of action and adventure, like the one that says Knispel was held back from promotions because he assaulted a superior. When she's done, the article is reduced to four paragraphs, three of which relate to his death, at age 23, when he was struck by a Soviet tank. Later, someone will leave a short, sad note on the article's Talk page: "There used to be a lot of

information here about his military career, unconventional attitude to military discipline etc. ... Why has it been deleted?"

Coffman's edits have jumped from 1,400 a month to 5,000. She is entering her most prolific period. She has been filling her User page with study guides and research, but now her tone gets bolder, punchier. The names of the sections go from dry ("Waffen-SS revisionism") to cheerfully contemptuous ("High Moral Fiber Sub-department"). The page is becoming a sprawling tongue-in-cheek taxonomy of her obsession—and the parapet from which she taunts her adversaries.
"G'day," she reads in a note in the summer of 2016. It's Peacemaker67 again, back with one last warning. "I've noticed that you have been nominating articles on Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross recipients for deletion, after you have deleted significant amounts of text and possible sources from them," he writes. "That type of behaviour is deplorable, and not appropriate on en WP." (Coffman's detractors often imply that she doesn't fit in on "en WP," or English Wikipedia. They often assume that she is a visitor from German Wikipedia, "de WP," because of her insistence on holding the Wehrmacht to account.) "I suggest you stop," Peacemaker67 concludes. "Cheers."

They go back and forth again. Eventually, Coffman appeals to the broader Wikipedia community to decide who is right about the notability of these medal winners. "The issue appears to be complex, so I would appreciate further input," she writes. The debate hinges on certain policy wordings, along with the question of how to compare military awards from France, the US, Great Britain, and Germany. The WikiProject Military History members are well represented, but Coffman picks up crucial support. A user called MaxRavenclaw objects to the claim that purging Iron Cross winners is a form of "victor's justice": "You should know that history is written by the literate, not the victors. You can't expect anyone to take you seriously when you make such statements."

The fight rages across pages for months. In the fall, Peacemaker67 writes that he is "frankly sick to death" of K.e.coffman's "ongoing campaign." It is "detracting from the enjoyment of the volunteer editors who actually contribute to this encyclopaedia," he writes. A careful reader of his cri de coeur will note that he assumes Coffman to be a man ("Community norms rule on WP, not his personal

views"). This is a common misimpression among the Military History gang. Coffman never tries to correct it.

Coffman on a hill above her neighborhood. PHOTOGRAPH: TALIA HERMAN

After six months of debate, on January 22, 2017, Coffman is vindicated. An administrator leaves a note steeped in Wikipedia reasoning. "In the case of the Knight's Cross the community has established a consensus," it concludes. "Sufficient reliable sources are lacking for many recipients." In other words, there should be no presumption that winning a Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross makes you notable enough for a Wikipedia article. The only thing you're guaranteed is a one-line spot on a long list of winners.

> Coffman keeps track of the accusations against her —"campaigning," "forum-shopping," "not dropping the stick."

After the case is settled, Coffman and her more vocal opponents retreat to separate corners. But one bitter-ender, LargelyRecyclable, appears to create a troll account and continues objecting to her changes. She finally takes the user to the Arbitration Committee, English Wikipedia's version of the Supreme Court.

The panel doesn't wade into the specifics, writing explicitly that "it is not the role of the Arbitration Committee to settle good-faith content disputes among editors." But what it does rule gives Coffman a feeling of support, she says. LargelyRecyclable is banned indefinitely from editing English Wikipedia. The ArbCom also notes that groups like WikiProject Military History "do not have any authority over article content or editor conduct, or any other special powers." They can accuse Coffman of whatever they like—vandalism, McCarthyism, "deletionist zeal." She has just as much right to edit history as they do.

And few can match her output: 97,000 edits, 3,200 pages created, countless debates argued and won. Today, K.e.coffman is a solid member of English Wikipedia's editorial elite—No. 734 out of 121,000, as of this writing. She keeps a watch list with about 2,000 articles on it. A notification pops up next to the listing whenever someone tries to make a change. That's the thing about edit wars: They never end.

But Coffman, of course, avoids martial language. Wikipedia isn't a battlefield; it's real estate. "You have to maintain your house," she says. "You have to have a security system."

On her User page now, there are sections called "Nazi fancruft" and "Apocryphal nicknames." There are lists of apologist sources and right-wing publishers. There is an entire offshoot page called "My allegedly problematic behaviour," where she keeps track of the accusations against her—"campaigning," "forum-shopping," "not dropping the stick." She has even given herself an award for all her heroic work: the Vandal's Cross of Iron Cross with Swords and Diamonds.

Let us know what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor at mail@wired.com.