

PRAISE FOR
THE BLEIBERG PROJECT

“A solid thriller.”

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“A unique, exceptional thriller... a phenomenon.”

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“Khara’s thriller, with its pared-down prose, pell-mell pace, and extreme brevity, might remind some of Ian Fleming’s Bond novels or Adam Hall’s Quiller series...A quick read to be savored as a hurried snack rather than a leisurely French meal.”

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“This is a great translation, nicely catching the rhythms of US English and developing considerable narrative drive as we quickly get into the action. The narrative is built around multiple flashbacks so we can slowly piece the key events together before and during the War... more interesting than the conventional linear novel.”

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“An astounding thriller.”

—*Tele7jours*

“It’s fast paced, nonstop action, which makes *The Bleiberg Project* extremely difficult to put down.”

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“This book kept me completely involved from the first page. The suspense is incredible because all the events take place in a matter of days. And they are action-packed days. Khara did his research and used it to weave a tale so believable you’ll find yourself shuddering because it could be happening right now.”

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“This is an excellent thriller that everyone should pick up...another great read from the team at LeFrenchBook.”

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“He was this amazing, scarred man who didn’t allow himself to have anything other than the work he did and we find out why in *The Bleiberg Project*. That part of the story was riveting. The fight scenes were awesome and jumped off the page when you read them.”

—*5-star GoodReads review*

“Khara has written a fast-paced race-against-time thriller with sympathetic characters. Everyone has a secret it seems and it is this vulnerability of each of the main characters that serves as a stark contrast to the power seekers for whom life is cheap...This is a thriller that fans of John Grisham, Robert Ludlum or Ian Fleming will enjoy.”

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“A mix between action movie and an espionage novel, with a tender, human story, all together making it unforgettable.”

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—*Bouquinbourg*

The Bleiberg Project

A Consortium Thriller

David Khara

Translated from French by Simon John

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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*“The farther backward you can look,
the farther forward you are likely to see.”*

—Winston Churchill

DAY 1

CHAPTER 1

STUTTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP, 1942.

Two years. Two long years in the frozen hell of northern Poland. You couldn't say he wasn't devoted! Horst Geller had joined the *Schutzstaffel* at the beginning of 1936. He was twenty-three. He had never been a big Hitler fan, but when he saw the way the führer fascinated the mob, he knew joining up was the smart thing to do. Horst had chosen the SS to be left alone, not to be part of Hitler's personal protection squad. As a member of the SS, he knew his family would be respected and protected from the cloud of paranoia that hung over Germany. His homeland had gone insane and taken Europe down with it. But one day, the war would be over, and order would return. Horst was even willing to bet his little apartment on it.

In 1940, he found himself married and soon thereafter, a father. His whole life changed with this double reward. But 1941 hadn't begun well. His higher-ups gave him a promotion, which in itself was good, even if he hadn't asked for anything. But it meant a transfer to Poland to guard a prison camp. It was an important mission, and all of his attempts to refuse the transfer had failed. So Horst had gone, heavy-hearted, leaving his wife, Karin, and his baby daughter, Gisela, behind.

“At least it’s not the front,” he told his grief-stricken wife in lieu of good-bye. Two colorless summers passed, both followed by winters, proving every night that hell is, indeed, a very cold place. From time to time, Horst got leave and went to Danzig, thirty-five miles to the west, where he’d get drunk and try to forget his solitude with the “soldiers’ girls.” His pay kept his wife and baby comfortably fed, which meant one worry fewer. Work in the camp wasn’t very complicated. He just kept an eye on the dissidents sentenced to forced labor in the *Deutsche Ausüstungswerke*, a special weapons factory that belonged to the SS. Sometimes he pulled Jews out of trucks and shoved them into the barracks, and once a week he supervised the distribution of the meager rations of bread and turnip soup. He occasionally took pleasure in seeing the Jews in their rightful place, but there were also children, and it was becoming more and more difficult to bear their fearful gazes and pleading. Horst didn’t want to hurt them. Of course, he had no sympathy for the Jews, and if he was asked to execute kids, he would, and for a simple reason: It was him or them.

Horst was an ordinary man lost in an endless winter, surrounded by hungry dogs and maniacal executioners. Sometimes he wondered how many other soldiers felt the way he did. How many of the elite soldiers answering to *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler wept at night? At least one other, he hoped.

But SS Geller was even more depressed than usual that night. The temperature hovered around five below, and he was standing guard at the hospital, an imposing building much cleaner than the prisoners’ barracks. The hospital would have given him the chills if he weren’t already frozen stiff. The Jewish children who still had the strength to stand were sent here to

satisfy the needs of the strange man who directed the place, known only by the name *Herr Doktor*.

The doctor never left the hospital and never mixed with the guards. Nobody had heard his voice. He communicated his needs in notes to the camp's new commander, Major Hoppe. Sometimes equipment was transferred from the weapons factory to the hospital, but the camp director was the only other person allowed inside. Horst had once come upon Major Hoppe unloading the shipping cases himself. Hoppe was a cruel, brutal man, not the kind of guy to take orders from just anyone, so the doctor had to be an intimidating character. Still, nobody tried to find out more. In the absurd world of Camp Stutthof, ignorance eased one's sleep and extended one's life expectancy.

November 9, 1942, was a special day. That evening, Himmler himself was going to visit the hospital. The camp's best soldiers were told to show the military and spiritual leader of the SS just how impeccably Stutthof was run. If everything went well, Hoppe thought they might receive more resources, men and equipment.

Horst was jittery. He took a long, hard drag on his cigarette and felt the smoke warm him up. His black leather gloves reeked of cold tobacco. He caught sight of a guard with two huge attack dogs patrolling the camp's barbed wire perimeter. At least that guy got to move around.

There were nine soldiers waiting with Horst, conscientiously freezing their asses off in the name of their supreme leader. The group was silent, but the looks they exchanged said much about their general weariness. Himmler and his staff of brownnosers would arrive in a few moments. The men would perform their pantomime without a hitch, and tomorrow morning a hot cup of coffee would help Horst forget the frigid cold.

The evening was bright, and the moon and stars shone from an immaculate sky, lighting up the fine mist that perpetually rose from the region's boggy ground. (The bright yellow searchlights in the guard towers were turned on only in high alerts.) Suddenly Horst and the nine other men threw down their cigarettes and crushed them under their heels. The sound of a motor could be heard coming down the dirt road that connected the camp to civilization. The rumble grew louder. Soon they could make out two approaching military vehicles. To their astonishment, the motorcade had only these two vehicles. The latest news from the front was good, but how could such an important man have such a small escort? Horst concluded the visit was top secret or, at the very least, meant to be discreet. The gates swung open, and the vehicles rolled to a halt in front of the honor guard.

The ten SS men snapped to attention, rifles resting on their left shoulders, their right arms lifted at a forty-five-degree angle, hands extended. Major Hoppe and the doctor hurried down the hospital steps and waited motionless in the middle of the two rows of soldiers. Four blond men emerged from the first vehicle. None were under six feet tall. They wore simple black uniforms in spite of the bitter cold.

One of them moved to the second car, opened its rear door and saluted *Heil Hitler* in a single crisp motion. Heinrich Himmler stepped out and gave the colossal soldier a friendly pat on the arm. A stiff aide-de-camp followed behind, carrying a heavy briefcase. The four men swiftly surrounded the *reichsführer-SS* and his assistant.

Horst watched the spectacle unfold from the corner of his eye. Four Bavarian woodsmen, dressed for August, protecting two little men in glasses, wrapped warmly

in their greatcoats. Himmler headed up the two lines of soldiers with his men in tow. Major Hoppe and the doctor tried to hide their disappointment as Himmler momentarily ignored them to review the honor guard, smiling and uttering words of encouragement to the men. Himmler stopped in front of Horst.

“Is this climate too harsh for you, private?”

Surprised, Horst felt his heart begin to race. The devil could read his mind! He seized the opportunity. A little sucking-up couldn’t hurt. “For you, Your Excellency, I would guard the North Pole.” Himmler came closer. He had the fat, round face of a prosperous family man, but his pince-nez framed a malicious and disturbing expression.

“That isn’t what I asked,” Himmler replied under his breath. Horst stiffened.

He’d been exposed, but he remained calm. He was tired of pretending. “Poland is hell. I miss Hamburg, Your Excellency.”

Keeping his gaze fixed on Horst, Himmler removed his glasses and wiped them clean. “You’ll be transferred tomorrow.” Horst’s smile evaporated, and he swallowed nervously. He’d gone too far. Time stood still. Himmler’s face wore a placid expression. “You’ll be sent to Wewelsburg Castle. I’m sure you’ll find the Westphalian climate more agreeable. I need more people like you—people who speak their minds. I’m surrounded by toadies, competent though they are.” He nodded, indicating Major Hoppe.

Horst tightened his salute in relief. “Thank you, Your Excellency.” He held back a *Heil Hitler* that wouldn’t have helped matters at this point. Himmler turned away and gave instructions as he walked. His assistant nodded in agreement. They joined the camp

leaders and swept into the front hall of the top-secret hospital. The masquerade was over.

The other guards gathered around Horst, taking out their cigarettes and lighters in unison. They warmly congratulated their lucky colleague. Horst tried to conceal his happiness, aware that his companions would soon be tormented with jealousy. They eventually dispersed and headed back to their quarters, but Horst stayed alone, his feet planted in the middle of the path. The knowledge that he would soon leave seemed to sharpen his senses. From now on, every breath of this frigid air would bring him closer to Germany and closer to home. He would hate Poland for the rest of his life.

One day he'd forget the horrors committed here. He took out the photo of his wife and baby from his inside pocket and kissed it. Suddenly, his vision blurred. A sharp noise wracked his skull. Where was it coming from? He tilted his head to the right. Orange flames enveloped his shoulder. The cold gave way to warmth, the world teetered, and he fell face-down. As the life painlessly left his body, Horst saw a trickle of blood run across the ground and over the photograph he was still holding in his burned hand. A child's bare feet scampered across frozen earth; this was his last vision. Horst Geller, SS man by happenstance, a husband and father swept up in the general madness of war, died November 9, 1942. He was one of ten official victims in an assassination attempt against Heinrich Himmler. The master of the Black Order survived.

The final solution rolled inexorably onward.

CHAPTER 2

MANHATTAN, PRESENT DAY, 9:48 A.M.

This morning, like every other morning, I'm hung over. My brain is fried. I'm a piece of shit. My head is pounding, and as I grope for aspirin on the bedside table, the lamp falls to the floor and breaks. How did that get there? When I sprinkle two pills into my palm, I feel better already. I toss them back and swallow them dry—water's for pussies. I bury my head in the pillow. I don't know what time it is, and I don't give a damn. There's a nagging sound, like something continually falling—or a lot of little things. My mouth tastes like tobacco. I'm a human ashtray.

I identify the sound. Water. A girl is in my shower. What's her name again? I don't remember, and I don't give a shit either. If she's taking a shower, she's leaving soon. Fine by me. Everything is fine by me, as long as I take the hits. There's one thing left to do, but I don't have the guts. I just want to be done with it once and for all. I could use a rope or jump off a building, but I'm a coward. So until I find an easy way out, I'm killing myself one day at a time. It's the same thing in the end.

She comes through the room, and I open an eye to see what she looks like. Small, brunette, tight. Not bad. She doesn't look at me and probably doesn't know my

name either. But now I remember hers. Rachel. Is it Wednesday? Rachel was Tuesday. Actually, no, I don't know her name. She makes an incredible amount of noise for somebody getting dressed. I hear her saying something from the other room. My face is still in the pillow, and I can't understand. Probably "see you later." Sure. See you never.

Finally I'm alone. I open my eyes. The fog in my head is gone, but it took its sweet time leaving. Ten in the morning, and I'm late for work as usual. That bitch splashed water all over the bathroom! I hate that. It's a holdover from the days when I liked everything to be neat and in its place. I mop up the floor with a towel and get in the shower. The warm jets of water massage my body and gradually wake me up.

I'm thirty-one. I'm an asshole trader who works for a piece-of-shit Wall Street firm. I'm just a nobody, but I still seem to have a name: Jay Novacek. I turn off the water and grab a pack of cigarettes that's been left beside the sink. I couldn't just leave it there all alone, poor thing. I light one, because if I'm going to stick with my two-pack-a-day habit I have to get cracking. I look in the mirror and have to admit that I'm pretty well-built, though the memories of college sports and my occasional squash matches seem pretty distant now. I'm a good-looking guy. Girls say so, anyway. Blue eyes and a square jaw—they like that. The mirror steams up, and I can't see myself anymore. Thank God.

10:20. I'm smoking my third cigarette and sprawled on the beige leather couch in the living room. A steaming cup of coffee rests on the glass coffee table. Coffee is the only way I'll make it through the day. If everything goes well, I'll be dressed in ten minutes and in my office before eleven. Miracles can happen.

I hate my apartment. It reeks of money—big, empty and cold. Did I ever like this shit? Leather? Glass and black lacquer? Abstract scribbles and splatters by painters more fashionable than talented? I guess the answer is yes. I recognize my personality only in the plastic Spider-Man and Doctor Doom figurines on top of my stereo system.

I take another drag. I'm a piece of shit who can't even remember what he did last night. But I do remember every detail of one day by heart, to the point that I play it in my mind again and again. How long has it been? Six months? My memory of that day is as vivid as the coffee cup in front of me. I close my eyes and replay the events of that day for the umpteenth time...

I'm at the office. In front of me are six computer screens, blinking everywhere, with graphs, curves, trends, numbers. The world's economy in a nutshell. On the other side of the Earth, people get up, work, pay back their loans, do their best to scrape by. But to me they don't live. They produce. And what they produce makes me rich.

It's Monday morning, and the Dow Jones has collapsed. My friends are all trying to sell, but I'm buying everything that comes past. At the market's close that afternoon, the results are unprecedented: an eleven-point gain. I'm a star. I've just made a billion dollars for my firm, and fifty million of it is mine. Nobody's hotter than me. My boss is on cloud nine. My clients call, one after another, to thank me for what I've done. Champagne in the boardroom with the decrepit senior partners, conservative assholes, every one. The associates join us, and we pass the bottle around. When it's empty we go to dinner—French and expensive. You do what you have to do. The other traders watch us go

by like masters of the universe. They throw me dirty looks. They can go screw themselves, the losers. In the elevator we joke and slap each other on the back.

Up until then everything was going fine. The sound of the doorbell snaps me back to the present. 10:23. Shit! Who the hell could it be? Whatever. Go on, asshole, ring all you want. He's a persistent asshole. I drag myself to the door. This apartment is way too big. I slide back the deadbolt and turn the knob. Two huge military men are standing ramrod straight in the hallway. They're wearing their best brass, white gloves, hats, the whole nine yards. Even their medals are out, and these guys have a few. I'd say the first guy, the older one in front, has about fifty. His clone, twenty years younger, has nearly as many. They would seem to serve a purely decorative function.

"Mr. Corbin?" (Nobody's called me that for at least twenty years.)

"Mr. Corbin is my father. I'm Jeremy Novacek."

The penguins don't even flinch. "Jeremy Novacek, we're here to present our sincere condolences on behalf of the armed forces of the United States of America. Your father, Air Force Lieutenant General Daniel J. Corbin, passed away. It's an honor to present you with this flag, as well as your father's military decorations." They give a military salute—rigid but clean. I'm not sure what to do. They don't look like they want to come in and kick back. I salute in return. It seems to work. They turn to the left and leave in step with each other. I push the door shut and stand there. I'm holding a flag folded in a triangle and a box of metal scraps stamped with eagles and stars.

My old man is dead. I lean against the bar in the kitchen, grab a bottle of cognac and throw back a gulp. News like this calls for a celebration. Today's

program has just changed: first the office and then a train to Poughkeepsie. I ought to tell my mother that Lieutenant General Corbin finally decided to kick it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Khara studied law, worked as a reporter for Agence France Press, was a top-level athlete, and ran his own business for a number of years. Now he is a full-time writer. Khara wrote his first novel—a vampire thriller—in 2010, before starting his Consortium thriller series. The first in the series, *The Bleiberg Project*, became an immediate bestseller in France, catapulting Khara into the ranks of the country's top thriller writers.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Simon John was born in the United Kingdom. After graduating from Cambridge University, a quest for wine, women and goat cheese led him to Paris, where he began working in film production and translation. He primarily translates and subtitles movies, such as Michael Haneke's Palme d'Or-winner *Love* and blockbusters *Taken 1 & 2*. After twenty fertile years and 3,713 goat cheese salads in Paris, he is now based in Berlin.

ABOUT LE FRENCH BOOK

Le French Book is a New York-based digital-first publisher specializing in great reads from France. It was founded in December 2011 because, as founder Anne Trager says, "I couldn't stand it anymore. There are just too many good books not reaching a broader audience. There is a very vibrant, creative culture in France, and the recent explosion in e-reader ownership provides a perfect medium to introduce readers to some of these fantastic French authors."

www.lefrenchbook.com

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