

The ‘Good German’
History and Genocide in Contemporary German Film
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ABSTRACT

As early as 1946 with Wolfgang Staudte's 1946 film *Die Mörder sind unter uns*, the trope of the "Good German" has served as an exculpatory coping mechanism for everyday Germans helping to come to terms with Germany's Nazi past. While richly studied throughout the decades of postwar film, several recent German productions have begun to recontextualize the Good German in older problematic eras of German history, and to great acclaim. These media, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022), *Babylon Berlin* (2017-), and *Der vermessene Mensch* (2023), apply this trope to the eras of the First World War, Weimar Republic, and Germany's colonial genocide in Namibia, respectively. This thesis first works to concretize the sociocultural value today, and thus new-found development, of this trope, within its Holocaust/Nazi German contexts. Then, each of these new productions are analyzed to illustrate how they not only repeat but build upon the already dubious trope of the Good German. Rooted in German film analysis and historiography, this work demonstrates how the construct of the Good German serves modern audiences' redemptive desires through creative license, which blurs the line of the historical and fictive. Questions asked and addressed are: What is the Good German, and how has it developed historically? What needs among audiences/producers does this trope serve? How does the Good German endure within these recent media productions? As the Good German trope develops and expands, how can it be placed into constructive conversations about memory and guilt?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION	1
What is the Good German.....	2
Thomas Elsaesser: Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis	10
CHAPTER 1: <i>IM WESTEN NICHTS NEUES</i>	16
Erzberger and the ‘Good German’	19
Friedrichs and the ‘Evil German’	22
An Alternate Universality	25
Representing the German Past with Internationally Consumable Ideology	34
CHAPTER 2: <i>BABYLON BERLIN</i>	38
Gereon Rath as the Good German	40
The Impending Doom of Weimar	45
The Failure of the Good German	51
CHAPTER 3: <i>DER VERMESSENE MENSCH</i>	57
Dr. Alexander Hoffman as the Good German	59
Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators Imagined	67
CONCLUSION	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY	78

INTRODUCTION

A nation of the most front-facing past has a problem facing its past. Germany's wrestling with its Nazi past has provided, for decades, an arena for addressing the most heinous acts of a nation-state. From this political, social, and cultural stage, the First World has watched and influenced the movements of the reconstituted nation—internally is the sensible desire to responsibly bear memory of the ultimate evil, Nazism; externally is a desire to see a nation redeemed.¹ Both these needs are in part satisfied within German filmic representations of the past through an enduring trope: the Good German. A long-standing narrative device of Holocaust film to excuse and rationalize participation of average Germans, the concept can be summed up in the thought: 'Grandpa did have to work with the Nazis, but he was actually a good person, caught up in bad times.'

The following thesis leads the reader through two recent German films and one television series, all of domestic and international magnitude. First, the 2022 rendition of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022), second, the TV/streaming series, *Babylon Berlin* (2017-), and finally the German film, *Der vermessene Mensch* (2023). Within each, the 'Good German' trope is identified and outlined throughout, with the overarching premise that the Good German narrative is being drawn out to exculpate individuals of

¹ Although numerous points of evidence can be highlighted to evidence this, the efforts of Konrad Adenauer to commit to Western values and be seen as a reliable nation can be seen described in: Jeffrey K. Olick and Daniel Levy, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint: Holocaust Myth and Rationality in German Politics," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 6, 1997, 925-926. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657347>.

the more distant dark pasts; respectively, the First World War, Weimar Republic, and lastly, the Herero and Nama genocide.

Prior to exploring these films' exegesis, it will first be established what the Good German trope is within film historiography and memory studies. Following this background, the methodology and analytic approach of the analyses will be discussed. Essential to understanding the commentary and implications offered in the following film analyses—that is, the ‘why does it matter?’ of the piece—is the framework of psychoanalytical parapraxis. This model, built off of Freudian psychoanalysis by Film Scholar Thomas Elsaesser, facilitates a means of understanding film in the larger context of cultural memory.

What is ‘The Good German’

A pursuit of good Germans—to be distinguished later here from the film archetype ‘Good Germans’—began almost as soon as the war ended. Of course, in the decades prior, Germans had become a generational evil to the allied powers; that is, much of the western world. Writing in the midst of the Second World War, Sir Robert Vansittart, a British diplomat and author, points out the external problem of perception which the Good German will seek to solve. In just one of his writings which “had gained wide currency”² in British media, he states “History puts it to you plainly. The *German* is often a moral creature; the *Germans* never; and it is the *Germans* who count. You will

² Pól Ó Dochartaigh and Christiane Schönfeld, “Introduction: Finding the “Good German” in *Representing the “Good German” in Literature and Culture after 1945: Altruism and Moral Ambiguity*, edited by Pól Ó Dochartaigh and Christiane Schönfeld 1-15. (Rochester, New York: Camden House), 2013, 2.

always think of *Germans* in the plural, if you are wise.”³ Across the pond in America, German “exiles such as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Lion Feuchtwanger worked at countering this view”⁴ in the public eye. However, the resentment in the US went so far as to require Mann to testify before congress in 1945 in defense of a German culture on the brink of *damnatio memoriae*.

Domestically, Germans had the issue of self-image to solve in the aftermath of the war and Holocaust. Here, in the ruined remains of German defeat, being a good German—that is, the individual, moral creature described above—served several purposes. First, for those complicit with the regime, there was the necessity of self-preservation to be found a ‘good German’ through forged documents, false identities, and diminished roles within the party and Holocaust. The most infamous and widespread cases being the ‘ratlines’ established by various actors within the Catholic Church and Red Cross, which provided identities and visas for thousands of Nazi fugitives’ relocation to the Americas.⁵ Among them were criminals as high-ranking as Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele, and Klaus Barbie, and countless low-ranking functionaries whose names were lost to history.⁶

Conversely, among those not complicit in the regime’s crimes, the effort to become good Germans initially constituted celebration of those who resisted. Even as the occupied east and west were partitioned into separate nations, this effort could be

³ Qtd in. Dochartaigh and Schönfeld, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴ Ó Dochartaigh and Schönfeld, 2.

⁵ David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*. London: William Heinemann, 2004, 207.

⁶ Dalya Alberge, “Red Cross and Vatican helped thousands of Nazis to escape,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/25/nazis-escaped-on-red-cross-documents>

seen on both sides. Among the westerners, figures like Claus von Stauffenberg, who led a failed plot to kill Hitler from within the Nazi elite, were celebrated as active resisters. In the soviet east, vanguards like Ernst Thälmann, leader of the German Communist party and paramilitary group in opposition to fascism, provided flawed, but real examples of good Germans.⁷ Although due to this memorialization of heroes, it quickly became evident among the countless bystander Germans that “highlighting the existence of resistance, no matter how small in terms of the numbers of people who participated, could only serve to highlight their own failure to resist.”⁸

Millions of Germans who survived the Third Reich were thus compelled by internal morality and external political pressure to face their cultural past. Although they could find or fabricate good Germans, the German masses could not become them. There was a failure to address Sir Vansittart’s claim, that the collective was evil, despite the goodness of individuals. From this distress of collective and individual identity came a solution: the Good German. The Good German is a fictional abstraction of good Germans, which draws from, but is largely disparate from true-to-life figures. Furthermore, their nature as panacea for the collective guilt of Germans dictates that they must not occupy the role of hero or perpetrator/collaborator. Instead, they embody the ethical bystander. Fabrication of these fictional characters began almost as immediately as the pursuit of true good Germans. Among the earliest filmic examples of this is Wolfgang Staudte’s 1946 film *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (The Murderers Are Among Us). While many films of the immediate post-war avoided wrestling with the

⁷ Ó Dochartaigh and Schönfeld, “Introduction,” 1 and 3.

⁸ Ó Dochartaigh and Schönfeld, “Introduction,” 3.

very recent past outright, “Staudte’s early postwar films were exceptions to this trend.”⁹ Particularly, the filmmaker sought to elucidate what Ulrike Weckel identifies as *Mitläufer* or Germans who the occupying western powers classified as ‘followed along’ with the Nazi regime. This administrative category captured essentially all those who fell between criminals and the “exonerated,” and this large proportion of the population are those which initially needed the Good German.¹⁰

Die Mörder sind unter uns establishes several patterns of the Good German which would be echoed in future films. First, the main character—here a wartime doctor, Hans Mertens—witnesses crimes against humanity which he is unable to stop, in spite of his efforts. Second, the Good German must exist in the space of the *Mitläufer*, the not-so-innocent bystander. This position also necessitates truly evil characters. In the Holocaust context, it is the SS or Wehrmacht officer who gives the order, often accompanied by evil henchmen, who follow unquestioningly if not passionately. Third, victims have a passive presence in this story of the Good German. Here, a shockingly beautiful woman who just returned from a concentration camp, Susanne Wallner, serves only to help the traumatized doctor in the post-war rubble of Berlin. Finally, the film alludes to historical justice—here via the death of perpetrators—but instead opts to alleviate German cultural memory and guilt. This is seen as Doctor Mertens confronts the commander of his murderous unit after the war with a pistol, only to be talked down from executing the man by Wallner. Instead, the perpetrator is arrested for his crimes,

⁹ Ulrike Weckel, “The *Mitläufer* in Two German Postwar Films: Representation and Critical Reception,” *History & Memory* 15 no. 2, (Indiana University Press, 2003), 64.

¹⁰ Weckel, “The *Mitläufer*,” 64-65.

and the victim and bystander walk away into a happily-ever-after. Of course, the symbolism of redemption, forgiveness, and reestablished German morality are impossible to miss.

Within the larger pattern of post-war German film, Staudte's work belongs to the *Trümmerfilme* (Rubble films) of the latter 1940s. Although plots revolved around the horrors of (post-)Nazism, their emphasis was on specifically "the German people's postwar experience of loss and self-alienation."¹¹ The war of annihilation and accompanying genocide merely stands in the background of these works, as there is a refusal to truly engage with victims and perpetrators of these great crimes. Instead, on screen is the fictive, whitewashed, and self-congratulatory displays of the Good German. Dismissal of history notwithstanding, the desire for and production of the Good German in media is not malicious. In the large body of scholarship surrounding this early genre, it has been identified that "Rubble films focus on this crisis of the individual, its self-contempt, and reflect 'a common preoccupation with the issues of individual and collective guilt.'"¹² The Good German fundamentally seeks to heal the wounds of German identity, past and present.

As the rubble was cleared and reconstruction began, *Trümmerfilme* would give way to other filmic trajectories of the next decades, yet the desire to explore and alleviate the complexities of German guilt and memory would endure. Novel to the

¹¹ Christiane Schönfeld, "Being Human: Good Germans in Postwar German Film" in *Representing the "Good German" in Literature and Culture after 1945: Altruism and Moral Ambiguity*, edited by Pól Ó Dochartaigh and Christiane Schönfeld 111-137. (Rochester, New York: Camden House), 2013, 115.

¹² Schönfeld, "Being Human," 115.

Good German narratives of the 50s and beyond was the partitioning of Germany into West and East. The nation(s) which Thomas Mann once begged to preserve had become a cultural, economic, and strategic center of the Cold War. This quickly influenced film: “between 1952 and approximately 1957 the West German government actively encouraged film directors to produce war films in an attempt to gain public support for its rearmament programme.”¹³ Films such as Frank Wisbar’s *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* (1958) and Geza von Radvanyi’s *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben* (1959) could serve this purpose in several regards. In order to quell both domestic and international concerns for a remilitarized Germany, these films depicted the former “*Wehrmacht* soldiers as victims not just of National Socialism, but also of communism.”¹⁴ Simultaneously, the *Wehrmacht*’s atrocities in the East had to be glossed over to establish their image as Good Germans, a mythos that would last well into the 1990s until its public debunking in the March 1995 exhibit ‘War of Annihilation: Crimes of the *Wehrmacht*’ in Hamburg.¹⁵

Moving into the filmography of the 1960s and 1970s, there would be a tangible shift in the German Cinema, namely the New Wave. Through several means of narrative structure and psychological appeals, this new approach to filmmaking would pose challenges to the Good German, briefly explored in the following section. Despite these challenges, the Good German would return to media prominence in the 1980s with the

¹³ Helen Wolfenden, “The Representation of *Wehrmacht* Soldiers as Victims in Post-war West German Film: *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?* and *Der Arzt von Stalingrad*” in *A Nation of Victims?: Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, edited by Helmut Schmitz 71-85. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 71

¹⁴ Wolfenden, “Representation of *Wehrmacht* Soldiers,” 71.

¹⁵ Wolfenden, “Representation of *Wehrmacht* Soldiers,” 83-84.

series *Heimat* which once again tackled the societal layer of *Mitläufer* bystanders, but with a second- and third-generation awareness. A chief development in the related field of historical consciousness being that of *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history). In brief, this was the German manifestation of an international wave in altered historical approach, which can be defined in the German context as: “A strong interest in relating to past events on a tangible, emotional, and subjective level and in a way that afforded the opportunity of identifying with past actors.”¹⁶ In practice this approach usually warrants an emphasis on individual’s stories (be they fabricated or real), rather than the documentary-style approach of large scale war efforts or Holocaust history writ large. *Heimat* certainly falls into the category of the (fabricated) former, as it moves episodically through German history as lived by fictitious narrators beginning in 1919 and ending in 1982. It should not be taken that *Heimat* stands as an isolated incidence, merely the most prominent in a “wave of new media images.” These media unfortunately “included hardly any critical probings into the population's passivity vis-à-vis the Holocaust.” Instead they opting for “a vision of everyday life during Nazism devoid of many important groups of victims.”¹⁷

Given the distance films like *Die Mörder sind unter uns* have with second and later generations of Germans, fictitious narratives of individual bystanders had to evolve. In the wake of *Alltagsgeschichte*, media like *Heimat* introduce a generational element which irresponsibly ties the present to the past. That is, it exculpates those

¹⁶ Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory : History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz*, Athens, (Ohio: Ohio University Press), 2006, 65.

¹⁷ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 67.

(fictional) actors of the past, in a manner relatable to the (real) present. The parallels to mid-century film would persist through the 1990s, with films like Joseph Vilsmaier's *Stalingrad* (1993) appealing to the same exculpation of Wehrmacht soldiers identified in the trend of the 1950s, but with an alternative motivation. Following reunification, the needs of the Good German trope have grown, but at their core, remained unchanged as the need to understand the first generation of perpetrators and the inaction of bystanders endures. However, these needs to respond to the German criminal past have now disseminated through generations and even nationalities.

To serve the growing international and intergenerational demands for representation, the trope of the Good German persists into the 21st century with major films and series. Studied examples of this include *Der Untergang* (Downfall, 2004),¹⁸ *Dresden* (2006),¹⁹ and *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (Generation War, 2013).²⁰

Additionally, each of these has been met with ever larger government-sponsored budgets and increasingly international audiences. In addition to probing the needs behind this domestic and international growth, this thesis is particularly concerned with the very novel expansion of the Good German trope outside the Holocaust past. In the next

¹⁸ A piece which explores how *Der Untergang* uses its accurate portrayal of Hitler's final days in a manner that is sympathetic to many around him see Paul Cooke, "Der Untergang (2004) Victims, Perpetrators and the Continuing Fascination of Fascism" in *A Nation of Victims?: Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, edited by Helmut Schmitz, 247-262. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

¹⁹ Another which explores German victimization while emphasizing a symbolic romance between a British Woman and German soldier can be found in Paul Cooke, "*Dresden* (2006), Teamwork and *Titanic* (1997): German Wartime Suffering as Hollywood Disaster Movie," *German Life and Letters* 61, issue 2, March 12, 2008.

²⁰ For a take on redemption and false historical narratives in this series in line with the Good German see Volker Benkert, "*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*: Apologie und Erlösung von der Vergangenheit im Fernsehkrieg" in '*So war der deutsche Landser...': Das populäre Bild der Wehrmacht*, ed. Jens Westemeier (Paderborn: Brill Germany, 2019).

section on methodology, means are established by which an exploration of the Good German will be undertaken in three film analyses. Novel to this study is that all three films concern matters of history beyond the Holocaust.

Thomas Elsaesser: Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis

The methodology of this thesis is rooted in the applied psychoanalytical concept of parapraxis, or *Fehlleistung*.²¹ This term, coined by Sigmund Freud translates to ‘failed performance’, or, alternatively, ‘the performance of failure.’ This most recognizable in the Freudian slip, that is words unintentionally spoken that may reveal a subconscious/unconscious intention or desire. According to scholar Thomas Elsaesser, this phenomenon and its application to film studies (as a means of performance) go far beyond this basic understanding.²² Parapraxis is the study of that which is (un)consciously presented in a performance, be it casual conversation, authorship, or film. Crucially, these errors are not borne of ignorance, but of memory, and thus are subject to psychoanalysis.²³ While Freud worked on the present errors of memory, Elsaesser adds to this a study of what is absent, specifically, the absence of Jews in New German Cinema films of the 1960s and 70s.

Elsaesser argues that this absence of Jews can be read as a reflection of the absence of Jews within German culture and memory in the era. This includes prior filmic eras of the late 1940s *Trümmerfilme*, or rubble films, such as Staudte’s *Die*

²¹ Notably, the various translations of Freud have resulted in different translations of *Fehlleistung*, but this expression is from James Strachey’s as mentioned in: Thomas Elsaesser, *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 101.

²² Elsaesser, *German Cinema*, 111.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. United States: The Macmillan Company, 1914, 250.

Mörder sind unter uns (1946) and Helmut Käutner's *In Jenen Tagen* (1948).

Additionally, the 1950s were dominated by the German-centric, romanticized nostalgia of *Heimatfilme* or homeland films. Among these pieces like Hans Deppe's *Grün ist die Heide* (1951) and Herbert Fredersdorf's *Försterliesel* (1956) bore a similar absence of Jewish figures with concomitant German and the past. However, New German cinema's filmic absence of Jewish characters serves as deliberate parapractic acknowledgement of the void in German film and society. That is, the absence of Jews in German film is a presence of the destruction of the Shoah, and further a parapraxis of Germans' memory surrounding Jews in the postwar. In a sentence, "absence as presence, presence as parapraxis"²⁴.

Beyond the New German Cinema movement of the 60s and 70s, Elsaesser explores parapraxis in the West German government's repeated political blunders of the late 20th century. Here the failed performance of memorialization, representation, and remembrance constitutes a more direct form of *Fehlleistung* which Elsaesser names the "politics of parapraxis." He cites decades of examples, from the refused toast of a German diplomat at a Russian Embassy in 1955, to Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan's visit to the Bitburg military cemetery in 1985 as belonging to the non-self-aware "politics of parapraxis".²⁵ These condemnable failures of the German state to properly acknowledge German culpability and mourn countless lives lost and destroyed by the German war of annihilation fell within the efforts to conduct what Theodor Adorno

²⁴ Elsaesser, *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma*, 111.

²⁵ Elsaesser, 103-104.

named *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or, the mastering of the past.²⁶ Even in reunified Germany, Adorno's 1959 call for a more reflexive, Freudian psychoanalysis which reaches behind the trauma is still pertinent. In the 21st century, slips in the official memory like those at Bitburg have been passed on to the constructs of cultural memory, principally, through the artifact of film.²⁷ Within film, we still see what Adorno addressed as the "effacement of memory" which "is more the achievement of an all too alert consciousness that its weakness when confronted with the superior strength of conscious processes."²⁸ This struggle between conscious desires to overcome the German past and the subconscious trauma responses of denial and bargaining are precisely what Elsaesser's parapractic method points to. The implementation of parapraxis is a means of advancing acknowledgement and mourning work, first dissecting modern media to reveal its heritage of "repetitive ubiquity of unintended mishaps and embarrassing *faux pas*" of West Germany, then calling for cultural bodies of work which engage in this Freudian self-reflection.²⁹

In support of his claim, Elsaesser's work *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* looks at the aforementioned New German Cinema's success in parapraxis, but also counterpoints it with the philosemitism of 1980s and 1990s German media. Here a radical backswing of cultural consciousness had thrust

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" in *European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Henry W. Pickford, (New York: Columbia University Press), 1998, 89.

²⁷ Here, the transition from official memory to cultural memory is suggested as a means of that described between Communicative and Cultural memory by Jan Assmann in the article "Collective memory and cultural identity." trans. John Czaplicka, *New german critique* 65 (1995): 125-133.

²⁸ Adorno, "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", 92.

²⁹ Elsaesser, *German Cinema: Terror and Trauma*, 103.

Jewish and German-Jewish memoirs, characters, actors, and authors to the forefront of Germany's, and the world's, attention. Although many of these stories were decades old, their existence had been underappreciated and disconnected from German society, even during the radical reckoning of the past in the late 1960s and 1970s New German Cinema. Here the "too insistent display" of stereotyped and hyperbolic Jewish (and other victims) stories stood as a "permanently fondled fetish-object"³⁰ that enabled Germans to feel representation, mourning, and acknowledgement were not only accounted for, but overplayed in the cultural zeitgeist. This dramatic oscillation from absence to presence came with an equal parapractic revelation: German politics of the past had advanced to a new stage of philosemitic celebration as the past was being mastered, overcome, and worked through. Between the radical terrorism of the 70s which sought to attack and purge the remaining (alleged) vestiges of Nazism and the pandering of German media to long ignored victims' voices, third generation German consciousness found itself seeking an alternate engagement with their past.

By the late 20th century, aided greatly by the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, a new conception or goal of German cultural memory could be reached. Namely, for Germany to truly overcome its past, it needed to be a leader, not just a member of the western international community. Sociologists Jeffrey Olick and Daniel Levy argued in 1997 that the nation had experienced three stages of desired outcome for their collective and cultural memory work: first, the reliable nation, then the

³⁰ Elsaesser, 107.

moral nation, and lastly the normal nation.³¹ In the immediate post-war years, both average Germans and their western occupants called out the bad past. The response of both parties was to construct a better future, emphasizing Germany's reliability to the western nations. This reconstruction was not only part of redeeming a nation at odds with the western world in the first half of the 20th century, but also a service of modern needs in the nascent Cold War. Following this, the nation's very public (and often bungled), moral campaign began. To be accepted in the West, Germany would have to display its moral development and remorse, more so than any nation before or since. Finally, through the previous efforts and with unification in 1990, the nation could reach normal socio-political status among its peers. Along with this comes a certain say in the political spheres. Yet, what Olick and Levy did not yet see writing in 1997, was the coming dominance of Germany economically and politically in the EU of the mid 2000s and beyond. Shaped immensely by its endeavors of cultural and collective memory, Germany finds itself in the most influential position of the last 80 years.

Where does the reliable/moral/normal nation find itself heading? Or rather, where does it find the West heading? Germany has in many ways exceeded its normalcy, to a position of European influence, the once normal is now a 'leading nation.' The subject of this study is principally Germany's cultural influence, exemplified in the increasingly international format of film and television. The films following were chosen for their truly novel engagement with dark chapters of the

³¹ Jeffrey K. Olick and Daniel Levy, "Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint: Holocaust Myth and Rationality in German Politics," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 6, 1997, 926, 930, and 932. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657347>.

German past other than the Nazi era, while relying upon tropes of Holocaust and Nazi representation. Within this study of a developing pattern in German media, the Good German trope can be explored via parapraxis to understand how the past is currently being represented, how these representations (dis)serve memory, and how contemporary understandings are shaped by these harmful narratives.

Chapter 1: *Im Westen Nichts Neues*

After narrowly surviving the charge through no man's land, Paul Bäumer runs over the French Embankment into the trench. After bayoneting a soldier through the heart, he immediately turns his rifle onto an unarmed soldier whose legs have been blown off and fires. Shortly thereafter, he comes into close quarters fighting, pulling out his trench shovel and cleaving it into the futilely raised empty arm of a French soldier. Paul then bashes the soldier's head several times before momentarily pausing to soberly focus on the face of the rather young soldier suffering from Paul's bludgeoning. The young Frenchman is then shot in the head by another German soldier, who calls Paul to press on, and his momentary commiseration vanishes.³²

In the scene described above, the audience can hardly recognize the previously naive, bookish young man who has now morphed into a hardened killer by the war. German World War I veteran Erich Maria Remarque in his 1929 novel described this product of the highly modern, industrialized, and yet intimately visceral war as “God only knows what devil”³³, who would not hesitate to kill his own father if he charged him. However, the Netflix-distributed 2022 production of *All Quiet on the Western Front* spends little time exploring Paul's individual transformation and struggle to remain the aspiring youth he was before the war. Instead, the German-led international production externalizes the plot and conflict with a novel storyline about the peace-seeking diplomat

³² *Im Westen nichts neues*, directed by Edward Berger, (Netflix, 2022), 1:09:20-1:10:38. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81260280>

³³ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929), 113.

Matthias Erzberger, and the hawkish, but fictional General Friedrichs. These characters and plot lines embody a new struggle in which Paul is no longer a conscientious agent and exemplar of war's gruesome transformative effects, but rather a victim, deprived of agency within a larger battle for the fate of Germany and its soldiers.

Adapted for a modern audience by German director and script co-author Edward Berger, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022) has received recognition in line with its predecessors. The original novel has had massive success in Germany and beyond, selling millions of copies despite an early ban by the Nazi party amid questions about the fictional novel's pacifist nature and "truth" in depicting the war³⁴. First converted to an American film by Universal Studios and director Lewis Milestone only one year after the novel's US release in 1930, the anti-war story was also an instant success on the big screen, earning mass critical acclaim as well as the Best Director and Best Picture at the third Oscars awards³⁵. Nearly fifty years and a Second World War later, a TV-film remake by ITC Entertainment directed by Delbert Mann was released in 1979. In many ways the same film as the one from 1930 (with a new coat of color film and high-fidelity production), the pacifist message of a bygone age remained resonant in a post-Vietnam America, earning a Primetime Emmy for editing and Golden Globe for Best TV Motion

³⁴ Thomas F. Schneider, "'The Truth About the War Finally': Critics' Expectations of War Literature During the Weimar Republic: The Reception of Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* [All Quiet on the Western Front], 1928-1930," *Journalism Studies* (London, England) 17, no. 4 (2016): 498.

³⁵ Best picture was then known as "Outstanding Production" see in: "All Quiet on the Western Front" *Variety*, May 7, 1930, <https://variety.com/1930/film/reviews/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-1200410362/>

Picture³⁶. Noteworthy of the 2022 adaptation is its return to German hands, although “the genesis of the project was a script by UK writers Lesley Paterson and Ian Stokell... once Berger signed on, he started work on another draft himself,” adding ““Theirs was a wonderful version, but I did feel that for it to be made again, it really needed a German perspective.””³⁷ In acknowledgment of this significant return to Germany, and to distinguish Berger’s film from the novel and prior renditions, this thesis will refer to this film by its German title *Im Westen Nichts Neues*.

Crucially, *Im Westen Nichts Neues* is the first film to drastically deviate from the critically acclaimed lineage that is *All Quiet on the Western Front*. While the developing technology of film and the tastes of audiences have changed, perhaps warranting a new adaptation of the film, its significant alterations to the story suggest a motive to change the narrative of *All Quiet* for the latest generations. Furthermore, the historical departures of this film also place its intentions in question, as the work fails to engage with, and at times works against, both historical record and the themes of Remarque’s novel. These narrative changes, I will argue, dubiously recontextualize the First World War through the popular filmic tropes of the Second. The central trope being that of the ‘Good German,’ which entails the exculpation of a falsely sympathetic, average German in favor of condemning a mythologized evil of the state and/or state-actors. Additionally, I will put forward answers as to why this popular trope of World War II and Holocaust

³⁶ “All Quiet on the Western Front (1979 TV Movie) Awards,” International Movie Database (IMDb), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078753/awards>.

³⁷ Demetrios Matheou, “‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ Director Talks ‘Extreme Shoot’, German Shame.” *Screen International* (Dec 06, 2022).

representation is being retroactively applied to the First World War and how it so successfully serves German and international audiences.

Erzberger and the ‘Good German’

Edward Berger’s audience is immediately greeted with a tale of the greater impacts of the war, not the individual story. The film opens to an evening landscape of towering pines and nestled foxes disturbed by distant rumbles of artillery fire, then bodies and mud—results of mankind’s folly and hubris. We are then introduced to a young soldier, Heinrich, sent charging into no man’s land as his comrades fall before and beside him. Nearly in tears, Heinrich digs his shovel into a French soldier’s shoulder, then, a cut to the title card. We then find Heinrich piled among the dead bodies of German soldiers, stripped and buried unceremoniously. Countless boots and uniforms are washed of blood and dirt, bullet holes resown by German women, Heinrich’s name tag still attached.³⁸ Of course such scenes of industrialized violence and its recycling are familiar to audiences through the legacy of Holocaust and WWII film. Later Paul will receive this uniform, symbolic of the literal war machine, which inputs young men, women, and the nation as a whole, outputting death, with its byproducts recycled for use in the next batch.³⁹ A praiseworthy depiction of the broader mechanisms of war, this scene is valuable on its own merits. Yet it already begins to engage in a separate discourse from the tale of the soldier as individual, as we are introduced to the larger slaughter of Good Germans who are in need of saving.

³⁸ *Im Westen nichts neues*, 00:55-8:05.

³⁹ *Im Westen nichts neues*, 12:17-12:50.

Enter Matthias Erzberger, the true-to-life politician and long-standing opponent of the war who sought to break the cycle of violence we see in the film's opening. Having himself suffered the loss of his son, Erzberger works against the militarist, nationalist forces the nation is caught up in, having made a sober-minded assessment of the German standpoint within the war. Immediately, we can recognize Erzberger as a German hero, inserted here to symbolize the truly good Germans and provide a manifestation of the ethical reality pursued. His storyline is a race against the clock in which he must negotiate with the merciless French commander Ferdinand Foch as well as his accompanying devoutly nationalist German representatives to save as many lives as possible, including Paul and his comrades. Over the course of the three days of negotiations, we see Paul and his remaining friends suffering the ongoing defeat of Germany on the battlefield.

In creating this novel plot line of Erzberger's efforts as a good German, much is lost in the development of Paul and his camaraderie with Kropp, Müller, Kammerich, Kat, and Tjaden. Berger gives the most screen time to the war itself, through unbridled violence in the physical and ethical filth of trench warfare, working to make the audience feel "grabbed by the lapels and dragged through the mud."⁴⁰ By contrast, Remarque's novel is centered almost entirely on the soldiers. Told from Paul's perspective, the reader becomes familiar with each soldier as their stories unfold. Those familiar with the novel know that Kat had a knack for finding food (an often-lacking resource even on the

⁴⁰ Matheou, "All Quiet Director Talks," *Screen International*, Dec 06, 2022.

frontlines⁴¹), and remember Müller's selfish desire for Kemmerich's boots following his leg injury. Berger even plays with some of the character elements, as Kat leads Paul to a nearby farm to steal a goose—just as they did in the novel—but those unfamiliar with the novel are left ignorant of the character traits behind these scenes. In fact, several of Paul's friends are entirely left out of the new film, and those present are woefully underdeveloped, serving only as viscera in their gratuitous death scenes. Here we see that moving toward a broader understanding of the war, which attempts to shift focus from individuals on the ground to state nationalism and militarism, good Germans are not redeemed, but lost. Whereas the work of Remarque sought to explore how good/ordinary people contribute and participate in these harmful forces, to their own self-destruction, Berger's work attempts to remove the controversy of identifying with the belligerents of a horrid war which would repeat itself.

Erzberger even verbalizes this in an allusion to World War II when he gives what has been called a “most haunting warning.”⁴² On the Compiègne train car he demands Foch to “be fair to your enemy, otherwise he will hate this peace.”⁴³ In many ways this echoes the prescient sentiments of Woodrow Wilson in his January 1917 speech on “Peace Without Victory” urging that forced terms such as those signed at Compiègne “would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not

⁴¹ Burkhard Asmuss, “Die Lebensmittelversorgung”, *Lebendiges Museum Online* (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2014). <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/kapitel/erster-weltkrieg/alltagsleben/lebensmittelversorgung.html>

⁴² Dina Mansour-Ille, “*All Quiet on the Western Front*: Directed by Edward Berger Netflix, 2022.” *The RUSI Journal* 167, no. 4-5 (2022): 150–151.

⁴³ *Im Westen nichts neues*, 1:45:40-1:45:47.

permanently but only as upon quicksand.”⁴⁴ Tragically, Erzberger failed on both accounts: achieving a peace in time to save Paul and his friends, and forestalling the Second World War. However, we cannot fault Erzberger in this film. Unequivocally the good German, he embodies a resistance to the harmful nationalist militarism of his government, while operating within it to a heroic (yet ineffectual) end. Conversely, though, the existence of the Good German necessitates an Evil German.

Friedrichs and the ‘Evil German’

Embodying the other side of Berger’s departure toward a distinctly German and de-individualized story, we have the new, fictional character: General Friedrichs. Sporting a comically villainous mustache and scar, feasting in a requisitioned mansion behind the front lines, Friedrichs is synecdochic of the fervently nationalist German economic and military elite. Seizing command and operating against the ceasefire, Friedrichs refuses to accept the weak, quiet end of the war (and novel) negotiated by Erzberger, opting instead for a heroic last charge. In his less-than-rousing speech, Friedrichs asks that his soldiers resist being “forced to watch as German Social Democrats render our beloved *Volk*⁴⁵ defenseless by accepting a perfidious armistice.”⁴⁶ Here, the stereotypical Prussian old guard, modeled after generals such as Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg (who were urging peace months before the armistice), begins propagating rhetoric which would become assumed knowledge among the Nazis. Hinting toward the stab-in-the-back myth,

⁴⁴ President Woodrow Wilson, “Peace Without Victory” speech, January 22, 1917. 64th Cong., 23 Sess., Senate Document No. 685: “A League for Peace.” Published online by MIT: <http://web.mit.edu/21h.102/www/Wilson%20Peace%20Without%20Victory.htm>

⁴⁵ My insertion of the German term used in the original language dialogue.

⁴⁶ Berger, *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, 2:04:45-2:05:02.

he blames a “perfidious” treaty, propagated by a leftist government which stands against the *Volk*. Here, Berger’s hindsight “German Perspective” bleeds together the Second World War and the First, with out-of-place nationalist rhetoric. Further still, this fallacious order, given in the literal last minutes of the war, would result in Paul’s highly symbolic death.

In addition to this simple, personified, caricature of the evils of war, Berger conceives a false account of the final days of World War I. Historically, in the weeks leading up to the November 11th armistice, German defeatism was at an all-time high. By October 1st, 1918, General Ludendorff announced to the Supreme Army Command that Germany was militarily defeated and should sue for peace. Immediately following this announcement, the German Chancellor, Georg von Hertling, resigned.⁴⁷ October 3rd, his first day in office, the new Chancellor Max von Baden wrote to President Woodrow Wilson, accepting the peace terms laid out by the president January 1918 and requesting an immediate armistice.⁴⁸ Further still, the environment of political unrest which ran throughout Germany would catalyze with the civilian protest-turned naval mutiny at Kiel on November 3rd, 1918, a revolt which would become an armed German Revolution.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Albrecht von Thaer, Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L. Aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915-1919, herausgegeben von Siegfried A. Kaehler. Göttingen, 1958. From German Historical Institute’s DGDB Project. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1443

⁴⁸ Erste deutsche Note an Wilson – Friedensersuchen, in Erich Ludendorff, Hg., Urkunden der Obersten Herresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/18. Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1920, S. 535. From German Historical Institute’s DGDB Project. https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=989.

⁴⁹ BArch, RM 8/1010 (Admiralstab der Marine, 3.-11. Nov. 1918), 4-7. <https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/direktlink/6a3ace3f-97ce-48b8-8f34-07a571344b92/>.

Within the military and social environment where peace negotiations, abdication of the Kaiser, and common notions of an impending end were well-known to soldiers and even discussed in the film among Paul and his friends, the idea that soldiers would venture into a literal 11th hour attack, is dubious at best. Despite this, when Paul is issued a last-hour suicide mission—even after the violent deaths of all his friends—by General Friedrichs, he and his division obey almost unquestioningly, to their demise. The division is sent to reclaim whatever land possible in the last minutes before the armistice begins under threat of firing-squad execution—another historical hyperbolic anomaly more in line with the Second World War than the First, where less than 50 German soldiers were documented as executed.⁵⁰ The film’s portrayal of an increased war effort in the last days and hours runs contrary to historical evidence, serving only to provide a means for Paul to be martyred at the hands of a fictionalized, malignant symbol of nationalist, militarist power: Friedrichs.

Certainly, characters exhibiting nationalist fervor and heartlessness similar to Friedrichs appear in the novel and previous films, namely Paul's teacher, Kantorek, and his Drill Sergeant, Himmelstoss. Kantorek being crucial to Paul’s decision to enlist, strums up his class by glorifying imperial military service and the ‘Fatherland’, in many ways prelude the nationalist propaganda of the Third Reich. Similar to Friedrichs, Sergeant Himmelstoss serves as a malicious arm of the national military, who, through his brutal and targeted abuse, is credited by Paul for making him and his comrades “hard,

⁵⁰ Gary Sheffield, “Military Discipline and Punishment,” *British Library*, January 29, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/military-discipline>.

suspicious, pitiless, viscous, tough”⁵¹ beginning the transformation which would leave him a hardened soldier. Yet, both of these characters are disgraced and stripped of their influence over Paul in the novel, Kantorek being drafted and shamed as a terrible soldier and Himmelstoss, a pathetic coward once sent to the front lines. Remarque deliberately uses these characters to convey that Paul was not beholden to the nationalist military order as he fought on to his doom, but rather did so in spite of them:

We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; but also we distinguished the false from the true, we had suddenly learned to see. And we saw that there was nothing of their world left. We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must see it through.⁵²

An Alternate Universality

A juggernaut of collective memory of World War I, Remarque’s novel was set apart by its drastically individualized portrayal of war, which ran contrary to state-sponsored propagandistic narratives; “indeed the individual accounts gather narrative and memorial inertia while official accounts wither and wane.”⁵³ Such official accounts propagated during the war “shield[ed] the public from the disheartening news from the front: the casualties, chemical warfare, and loss of morale”⁵⁴ instead offering images of what British MP CP Scott called “a pretty picture of the war with everybody doing gallant deeds.”⁵⁵ Essential to Remarque’s success was its intimate depiction of the horrid war, expressed not only through its gruesome detail of lived trench-warfare experiences,

⁵¹ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 25.

⁵² Remarque, 12.

⁵³ Joseph H Bailey, “Remembering World War I: The Unauthorized Authorized Account of All Quiet on The Western Front,” *Media History* 26, no. 3 (2020): 294.

⁵⁴ Bailey, 285.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Bailey, Joseph H. “Remembering World War I”, 286.

but also its tragic character-building, creating the prime “narrative synecdoche” in which Paul Baumer “represented every soldier in the conflict irrespective of national affiliation.”⁵⁶

Despite being a German story, it is characteristically non-German in its exploration of deadly patriotic zealotry, a fervor ubiquitous in the Great War and broader 20th century history. By moving away from propagandized and unrelatable nationalist narratives and generalized war stories toward an individualized (yet universal) human story of war and its traumas, Remarque’s novel was valuable not only to nationals of those nations involved in the war, but any reader who seeks to understand war’s human cost. This contrast is particularly highlighted by Remarque when Paul’s frontline experiences are challenged by the home front narratives of his old headmaster, who advises Paul that “all the enemy line must be broken through in Flanders and then rolled up from the top.” In reply to Paul’s kindly urge that “a break-through may not be possible,” the armchair general replies that Paul knows “the details, yes[...]but this relates to the whole. And of that you are not able to judge. You see only your little sector and so cannot have any general survey.”⁵⁷

Aside from removing the historicity of Remarque’s story, this modern German adaptation falls flat of the sociopolitical heft of the novel. Just two days following publication, the social democrat newspapers like *Das Reichsbanner* heaped almost universal praise on the novel for its pacifist messaging: “No one can ignore this book. It

⁵⁶ Bailey, 294-295

⁵⁷ Remarque, *All Quiet*, 169.

will stand, a monument, as long as there is knowledge of the World War in Germany.”⁵⁸

Liberal and left-liberal aligned papers doubled down on the acclaim of the social democrats, including mass advertising which hailed it as “the memorial to our unknown soldiers, the testament of all the fallen to all the living.”⁵⁹ Further left of center, the communist press largely dismissed the book for “lacking revolutionary indignation,”⁶⁰ while acknowledging its accuracy and function as “a mirror for the broad mass of soldiers.”⁶¹ Although consensus of the center/left on the novel's ability to capture the individual experience did come with concerns. Most prominent being the lack of investigation into the dialectical materialism behind the Great War. Without first delving into the imperial forces behind the war, and its soldier material needs sated in service to it, the book failed to gain praise among the staunch left, however its power to reflect to the masses the most base horrors of war was unquestionable.

However, Remarque's philosophy ran contrary to much of the right, nationalist forces of the time. Center-right nationalist papers like the *Chemnitzer Tageblatt und Anzeiger* accused Remarque of “devaluation and degradation”⁶² of soldiers' sacrifice, a questionable degree of military service⁶³, and ultimately an anti-German ideology. Much

⁵⁸ “‘Im Westen nichts Neues’ Ueber ein neues Kriegsbuch,” *Das Reichsbanner*, Magdeburg, Nr. 5, February 2, 1929 qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich.’ *Die Reaktion der deutschen und amerikanischen Presse auf Erich Maria Remarques ‘Im Westen nichts Neues’*, (University of Osnabrück: V & R unipress, 2020), 197.

⁵⁹ Advertisement of Propylaea Publishing, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, Nr. 37, September 15, 1929 qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich,’ 217.

⁶⁰ Anna Siemsen, “Kriegsbücher,” *Der Klassenkampf*, Berlin, Nr. 23, 1929, 735, qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich,’ 197.

⁶¹ Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich.’ *Die Reaktion der deutschen und amerikanischen Presse auf Erich Maria Remarques ‘Im Westen nichts Neues’*, (University of Osnabrück: V & R unipress, 2020), 197.

⁶² “Nochmals Remarque?,” *Chemnitzer Tageblatt und Anzeiger*, Nr. 180, July, 2, 1929 qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich.’ 278.

⁶³ Nikos Späth, ‘Das Thema hatte es in Sich,’ 287.

of this polemic resulted from the directly opposite narratives espoused by respected author-veterans like Ernst Jünger of dutiful and determined German heroes who emerged from the crucible of storm and steel.⁶⁴ Within national socialist papers, particularly the *Völkischer Beobachter*, criticism was expectedly belligerent. Prominent Nazi author Hans Zöberlein denounced the work as “an enthusiastic pardon of deserters, defectors, mutineers, and defeatists” amounting to “a second stab in the back at the war front.”⁶⁵ This vehement denial of *Im Westen nichts Neues*’ essence was a rejection of all that made it relatable: the progressive and traumatic dissolution of self into an ultimately purposeless, violent machine of nationalist conquest.

There is a tangible translation of the successful engagement of the original novel and the contemporary film’s failed parapraxis. Explaining the nationalist response to the novel, Monty Jacobs in the May 1929 *Vossische Zeitung* stated: “No wonder they resisted when they felt the impact of a book that was winning ten thousand readers every day. [...] For suddenly, as his success increased, his rivals discovered the absence of those words that Remarque had so painstakingly avoided.”⁶⁶ Those same absent words of political disavowal and anti-nationalism and anti-imperialism which so bothered the communist press, were all the more stinging to the right wing, who were the very target of Remarque’s absent-yet-present parapractic critique. Similarly, the 2023 film through its adaptation fails in retaining the absent narrative, instead insisting upon a ham-fisted

⁶⁴ Späth, 291.

⁶⁵ Hans Zöberlein, “Im Westen nichts Neues: Die Antworten eines Frontsoldaten auf das Buch Remarques” *Völkischer Beobachter*, Iss. 42, Munich, August 14, 1929 qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘*Das Thema hatte es in Sich*,’ 294.

⁶⁶ Monty Jacobs, “Märchen um Remarque,” *Vossischen Zeitung*, pg.1 qtd in: Nikos Späth, ‘*Das Thema hatte es in Sich*,’ 310.

narrative which, while seeking to encapsulate the same theme of pacifism, subverts the universal message to inject the larger discourse of German guilt and nationalism in 1918, 1945, and even later.

The universality of Remarque's work could be seen as geopolitically distant as the interwar United States. Travis Martin finds the 1930 *All Quiet on the Western Front* film as the most successful of several American films—including *The Last Flight* (1931) and *Heroes for Sale* (1933)—which serve as a reflection of World War I veterans' neurological trauma.⁶⁷ These neuroses were also prominent in the media of Germany. According to Anton Kaes in *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, "some of the most seminal German movies made in the 1920s found artistic expression for this elusive yet widespread syndrome,"⁶⁸ known then as shell shock. Paul's character is read by Martin as a specter of the millions of fallen soldiers, whose experiences and trauma render him an ineffectual shadow of his former self upon his failed return home.⁶⁹ Within a further meta-narrative, the book itself can be read as a veteran's desperate attempt to admonish a perhaps unreachable audience. Of course, the novel's powerful storytelling did find an eager, even international audience, prompting the creation of an American film based on its "universal depictions of war's effects."⁷⁰ It is the universality of shell shock trauma being intimately 'worked through' in the literary

⁶⁷ Travis L. Martin, "'Working Through' Societal Trauma in *The Last Flight*, *Heroes for Sale*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*." *WLA: War Literature & the Arts* 28 (2016), 1-2.

⁶⁸ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, (Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

⁶⁹ Travis L. Martin, "'Working Through' Societal Trauma," 11-12.

⁷⁰ Martin, 11.

and later filmic medium that made *All Quiet on the Western Front* the “best-selling German novel of all time”⁷¹, and an international success.

What new universality does today’s version of *Im Westen Nichts Neues* touch upon to reach similar levels of international acclaim? It is certainly not a communication of the difficulties of “men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war,”⁷² as the crucial arc in which Paul briefly returns home to find himself a living ghost of war, does not exist in the new film. Instead, within the new film’s storyline, Paul Bäumer’s struggle to remain mentally and physically whole in the last days of the war is dependent less on his trauma-borne ruthlessness as an individual soldier than the political ability of a failing German state. This newly imagined struggle is that of the Good German.

Identified as a film trope as early as 1921, even the early Good German film of the “wily foe” was accused of selling fantastical stories of the past in the hopes that “the solid American citizen would come to the conclusion that only one nation in Europe was moral enough to deserve his approbation:” Germany.⁷³ However, these alleged means of earning moral praise are quite the exception, as this trope has predominantly been studied as a phenomenon surrounding films on the Second World War, as expressed by Thomas Elsaesser:

The good German seems to be the opposite of the victim, but in terms of finding a way to “balance the books,” of converting guilt into a debt that

⁷¹ Tom Murray, “No one noticed *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Now it’s Netflix’s best ever shot at the Oscars,” *The Independent*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-oscar-b2299097.html?amp>.

⁷² Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, preface.

⁷³ “THE GOOD GERMAN FILM.” *New York Times* (1857-1922). (New York, N.Y: New York Times Company, 1921).

can be repaid, the good German and the German as victim are two sides of the same strategy. This becomes even more evident when one turns to the historical themes that allowed Germans to see themselves as victims (rather than/as well/ as perpetrators).⁷⁴

Despite originating after the First World War, the Good German trope dominates films of the Nazi past, as described in Elsässer's work. However, *Im Westen Nichts Neues* breaks ground to reapply the Good German concept to the First World War, while drawing upon post-WWII filmic representations of the Good German. Broadly speaking, the post-WWII film cannot admit that the average German, represented by Paul Bäumer, could be a willing participant of nationalist and militarist fervor of the First World War, particularly in light of rising nationalist and populist sentiments in modern Germany and Europe generally. Remarque's impression of a haunting specter who owns and warns of his failure in succumbing to the consuming force of war is supplanted by a representation of Paul rendered a zombie, mindless and helpless to stop the slaughter. This victim narrative is complemented by the inclusion of Matthias Erzberger's negotiations. However, the good German Erzberger fails to reach peace in time before the evil German orders a last charge, victimizing his Germans as well as the enemy. Given these circumstances, one can easily place Paul in the Second World War. In fact, German military historian Sönke Neitzel states in his review of the film "in this scene [before the final charge, where disobedient soldiers are shot] I believe the director has mixed up the First and Second World War."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Elsässer, *German Cinema : Terror and Trauma*, 274.

⁷⁵ Cezary Bazydło, "Vier Oscars, aber wenig authentisch: 'Im Westen nichts Neues,'" *MDR*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.mdr.de/geschichte/weitere-epochen/erster-weltkrieg/deutscher-film-im-westen-nichts-neues-vier-oscars-100.html>.



Paul as the mindless, helpless zombie awaiting the final order⁷⁶

Throughout *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, we see the hindsighted influences of the Second World War brought into a work which previously lacked this advantage, used in an attempt to modernize its universal message. As Berger stated himself: “Now we have the perspective, 90 years later, that this was just the beginning. There was a bigger terror to come. I wanted to shed a light on that.”⁷⁷ This hindsight within the film advances an alternate universal anti-war message: that both incapable moderate and cruel nationalist political and state forces subject agentless youths to the inhumanity of war. Additionally,

⁷⁶ *Im Westen nichts neues*, 2:06:58

⁷⁷ Matheou, “All Quiet Director Talks,” *Screen International*, Dec 06, 2022.

hindsight of economically and critically successful narratives of the Nazi past shape the plot and structure of the film. But, the Good German theme not only provides for an acceptable, yet exculpatory message, but aids in securing a production deal with Netflix resulting in six BAFTA awards, 4 Oscars, and countless other accolades.⁷⁸

Popular filmography of the Second World War would welcome the narrative of the eager and naive German, enlightened but destroyed by the war and caricatured as the military elite villain, unable to be saved by the outspoken noble politician. Such narratives of German victimhood are not only common in the cinema, but often financially and critically rewarded, increasingly so in the international market. Scholars such as Paul Cooke have noted the continuity of Good German narratives evident in newer films such as *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004) back to the earliest years of post-war German cinema in *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers are Among Us*, 1946) and Oscar-nominated *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*, 1959). To this list we can add *Heimat* (*Homeland*, 1984), *Stalingrad* (1993) and *Rosenstraße* (2003), to name but a few.⁷⁹ What is concerning about this pattern, is its growing financial and critical share of both German and international markets. As Cooke notes with *Der Untergang*, the film earned “\$92 million worldwide on its initial release and nominated for an Oscar in 2005,” the first major success of “the new wave of internationally acclaimed [German] films” grounded in “a form of ‘cinema of consensus’ that lacks ‘oppositional energies and critical voices’,”

⁷⁸ Tom Murray, “No one noticed *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Now it’s Netflix’s best ever shot at the Oscars.”

⁷⁹ Paul Cooke, “*Der Untergang* (2004) Victims, Perpetrators and the Continuing Fascination of Fascism” in *A Nation of Victims?: Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, edited by Helmut Schmitz, 247-262. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 251-252.

intent solely on achieving box-office success.”⁸⁰ Key here, is understanding why international German box office successes, including *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, increasingly rely on the trope of the Good German (even at this late post-WWII moment).

Representing the German Past with Internationally Consumable Ideology

Edward Berger’s conscious effort to provide a “German perspective” divulges an ideological goal tied to German national identity. His reimagining of an influential work, to great market success and popularity, comes with its own influence in Germany and abroad. Listed among the top 10 most popular non-English films for 14 weeks, as well as a top 10 film in 91 countries on its hosting platform Netflix, with hundreds of millions of hours of viewership, the film has had an undoubted effect not only on the legacy of the series, but on its audiences,⁸¹ most poignantly, on their understanding of the First World War. Exploiting the relationship between screen and viewer, Berger is—as described in Louis Althusser’s theories of ideology—more deliberately interpellating both German and international audiences than previous renditions.⁸² By hearkening back to *All Quiet*, an internationally known work, and utilizing popular tropes of international German media, both international and domestic audiences are primed for accepting a praiseworthy anti-war film. Further still, Berger’s constant emphasis on Felix Kammerer’s (Paul) face through close up invites an identification with Paul, while previous versions presented a distant

⁸⁰ Cooke, “Der Untergang,” 248.

⁸¹ Jazz Tangcay, “Netflix’s ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ Clocks More Than 150 Million Hours Viewed Since Release (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, March 3, 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/awards/news/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-hours-viewed-1235542190/>

⁸² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, transl. Ben Brewster, Monthly Review Press, 1971.

figure whose experiences were personal and far removed from the audience. Despite the unfathomable violence Paul endures, the technological intimacy with this violence that Berger crafts works with the lack of development to further urge audiences to inhabit Paul's tale of suffering.

Our tendency to insert ourselves into Paul's character here is a result of psychoanalytic relations with the screen functioning as a type of mirror. Jacques Lacan, in theorizing the "mirror stage" of early human development, describes "the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago* [the presented image with which we identify], which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality."⁸³ Read among adult audiences of film, the presented *imago* of Paul and our identification with him, a representative of World War I German soldiers, affects our reality. Of course, this reality is also shaped by historical understandings of the First World War and Remarque's work, but being generations removed from the lived reality of these phenomena, historical understandings butt against cultural memory. With this and the current age of mass international digital media, the more modern ideological framing of Edward Berger's narrative offers stiff competition to Erich Maria Remarque. And, although Remarque's work has enjoyed nearly a century of narrative dominance on the subject of World War I, Berger and others' work may yet win out. However, it must also be said that desire plays a strong role in ideology and our relation to it, which begs the

⁸³ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage As Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

question, do modern audiences desire to see WWI and Germans as Remarque portrays them, or as Berger does?

In Germany, there has long been a desire to accept the Good German narrative: To blame the ineffectual bureaucracy of political bodies such as the Kaiserreich and Weimar Republic and exculpate the individual—here the blindly voluntary German youth—in favor of an imagined evil elite as epitomized by Friedrichs. Such narratives have also found purchase overseas. As nations grapple with their own pasts, Germany's very public and massive reckoning with its 20th century history has for decades resulted in a profitable and ideologically formative film industry. But, the infiltration of this problematic and distinctly German means of coping with the past via film into classic literature of the First World War *is* a novel development. More concerning still is that this exposes an economic and intellectual market ripe for the expansion of problematic tropes, be they German or otherwise.

The new *Im Westen Nichts Neues* spends its screen time exploring the dueling narratives of the good German diplomat and elite petty military dictator, rather than the individual transformation of Paul. Thus, the conflict representative of lived war experience and trauma which established the novel as among the greatest anti-war and World War I stories is lost. A new message stands in its place, reflective of both World Wars, which places the burden of unjust war and death upon dramatized, cruel elites while victimizing Good Germans.

The danger of this societal critique levied by this new plot is not only its subversion of the original critique, but rather the simplification of its conflict, characters, and themes to create an exculpatory anti-war message. The atrocities of war are no longer

a consequence of mankind's folly carried out by thinking individuals, but instead bureaucratically subjected upon them. Paul ultimately was a victim of circumstance as opposed to a person irreversibly altered by their choices and own causality. Remarque sought to expose the reality of nationalist imperialism as he and millions of others experienced it, without "accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure."⁸⁴ With some historical revisions, an alternate universality of *Im Westen Nichts Neues* is put forth, which makes ideological appeals en masse to audiences seemingly eager to accept. All the more discomfiting is the application of this trope of the Good German to another historical era, growing beyond its already fraught presence in films focused on the Nazi era.

⁸⁴ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, preface.

Chapter 2: *Babylon Berlin*

It is 1929, a Cologne police officer transfers from his hometown to the Berlin Metropolis on a special mission for his mayor, Konrad Adenauer. Immediately thrust into the dark underworld of the city within the first episode, Gereon Rath and his Vice-Squad partner Bruno Wolter bust a pornography ring. In a physical struggle with a child pornographer, we see that despite his hard-nosed exterior, Rath is a shell-shocked veteran of World War I, reliant on ampules of opiates to steady his hand and mind. The struggle within the Berlin underbelly stirs the trauma of the battlefield, revealing a new battle for the fate of Germany, but this time within its borders and among its own people.

Loosely following Volker Kutscher's 2008-2022 Gereon Rath mystery novel series, *Babylon Berlin* situates its fictional storyline in the gray areas between criminality and law enforcement as social, political, and economic chaos take over the city. Factionalism plays a major role as the Communists and Fascists vie for the seat of power held by the Social Democrats, who themselves are attempting to control crime and gangs within the capital. The neo-noir TV series draws not only from modern gangster series such as *Peaky Blinders* (UK), but more so the dark, self-reflexive cultural works of the Weimar era itself. Building on these existing narratives, the subject matter of *Babylon Berlin* is not new, but its depiction of the era is more brazen, sensational, and teleological toward the rise of Nazism than seen before. Markedly, *Babylon Berlin* is

“the most expensive German television drama ever made” and more importantly: “it is also the most successful[...] having been shown in 100 countries worldwide.”⁸⁵

The series can be read as a spiritual successor of Weimar film. Exploring the same themes of “war and revolution” which were products of “a larger malaise: a collective neurasthenia in response to belated but frenzied modernization and urbanization.”⁸⁶ What better setting for depicting this social malaise than the Babylon of Berlin itself, where the religious symbolism of sinful hedonism precipitating Armageddon is not lost. Similarly, the mystery/neo-noir genre serves similar goals of the German Expressionist era, which Anton Kaes describes as an effort to portray “the toxic effects of war and defeat” which had “infected an entire culture.”⁸⁷ Yet expressionist filmmakers rejected realist means of expression to capture the emotions of suffering and loss behind the reality of World War I, as both the physical and metaphysical horror of the war and its aftermath could not be adequately captured in realism. Instead, “stories about deception, delusion, and madness abounded.”⁸⁸ What makes it worth investigating is that *Babylon Berlin*, operating 100 years after the traumatic defeat of the Great War, seeks to incorporate realist depictions of the traumatic effects of defeat on individuals and German society as a whole.

Babylon Berlin’s encompassing project rivals Edgar Reitz’s prodigious 1984 German film series *Heimat*, part of a larger German filmic legacy which has drawn

⁸⁵ Matt Charlton, “Jazz, Nazis and Bryan Ferry: how *Babylon Berlin* became TV’s most decadent drama,” *The Guardian*, November 18, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/nov/18/how-babylon-berlin-became-tvs-most-decadent-drama>

⁸⁶ Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 43.

⁸⁷ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 43.

⁸⁸ Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 44.

mountainous criticism for emphasizing German victimhood of the First and Second World war while ignoring the scale of war crimes committed by ordinary Germans. Simultaneously, the series has received praise for advancing German media by seeking to depict the suffering of everyday Germans. German television and media scholar Wulf Kansteiner reads *Heimat* as an early cultural product of *Alltagsgeschichte*, or everyday history. Kansteiner traces how this historical movement which emphasizes the smaller acts of everyday Germans often “produced self-congratulatory celebrations of local resistance groups”⁸⁹ that “provided an honest reflection of German collective memory,”⁹⁰ which sought collective redemption. The result was precedent for highly successful Good German narratives in prolonged television format. So, how can we similarly read *Babylon Berlin* as a dramatized series reflective of German collective memory through the Good German trope?

Gereon Rath as the Good German

In the series’ first season, Rath relentlessly pursues a mission for his father, who is seeking favor with then Mayor of Cologne Adenauer to become Chief of Police. Quickly, Rath finds himself literally and ideologically caught in the middle of the political turmoil of interwar Berlin. We see Rath’s place within this broader struggle in the fourth episode, as the conservative-controlled police force beats and eventually fires upon communist protestors in what would become known as the *Blutmai* (bloody May) massacre.⁹¹ Somehow able to walk through the standoff, and later even provide first aid

⁸⁹ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 67 & 165.

⁹⁰ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 165.

⁹¹ Chris Bowlby, “Blutmai 1929: Police, Parties and Proletarians in a Berlin Confrontation,” *The Historical Journal* 29, no. 1 (1986): 137.

to communist victims, we see Rath in civilian clothing. His ability to skirt outside, or even work against, the immoral efforts of the conservative ‘Vice Squad’ and political police (Sicherheitspolizei or SiPo) at large will continue as it falls into the hands of the NSDAP. It is this ability to avoid perpetration while working for and with increasingly anti-democratic forces that places Rath within the role of a Good German. While he embodies the trope of paradoxical complacency and active resistance common to Good Germans, Rath will encounter others along the way who display alternative imaginations of the Good German struggling against the unalterable tides of time.

By interspersing Rath’s narrative with historical events like that of *Blutmai*, or the later Black Friday stock market crash, *Babylon Berlin* is able to play in a space of history seldom covered. In 2017 *Babylon Berlin* “debuted to a public more primed than it might have been”⁹² to exploring the Weimar Republic in the context of comparisons drawn amid rising concerns and headlines regarding emerging fascism across the U.S. and Europe. However, the general lack of media and historical consciousness of this era—particularly outside of Germany and German Studies circles—gives the series an opportunity to enjoy the ‘archive effect.’ Scholar Sara F. Hall highlights the *Blutmai* scenes and the archival footage briefly used in the series for news reports of the event as a crucial early moment in which the effect is established. As she describes, the use of historical images and footage “issues a tangible reminder of history existing in tension with the creative license taken by the show’s creators, which allows it to exceed its

⁹² Darcy Buerkle, “The City (Almost) without Jews” in *Babylon Berlin, German Visual Spectacle, and Global Media Culture* ed. Hester Baer and Jill Suzanne Smith (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) 157.

function in the character centered plot and to generate a stirring conception of the past” which ultimately creates a “noteworthy but ambivalent form of historical consciousness”⁹³ for the viewer. Here the series creators can, much like Gereon Rath, skirt outside historical narrative, while maintaining a historicity necessary for crafting the Good German.

Another character we can identify as a Good German is Rath’s first companion, Charlotte Ritter. Introduced in the second episode as a woman living in extreme poverty, Charlotte supports her family seemingly alone by lucking into a filing job at the police precinct. We see her good nature early on when she finds Rath on the floor of the restroom, in a convulsing fit of post-traumatic stress, and helps him to take his opium ampule, sparing him the embarrassment of being found by a man. As the first season develops, Charlotte is revealed to be a sex worker in a glamorous jazz club by night, whose connection with Rath drives her to aid his investigations. However, Charlotte lacks the caught-in-between nature of Rath, and despite working for a sense of good, she regularly operates outside of legal bounds to help him solve crimes. Although it could be said that her inherently criminal status, as a prostitute, enables her to do what Rath could not, she faces legal consequences for operating outside and even against the police force to assist him in his cases. Her breaking of the law, trespassing, lying, and vigilantism reveal her to be a truly “good” German, refusing to cooperate with or support anti-democratic forces of the era. Furthermore, Charlotte’s supporting role for Rath in many

⁹³ Sara F. Hall, “Blood May Footage and the Archive Effect: The Political Ambivalence of *Babylon Berlin* as Appropriation Film” in *Babylon Berlin, German Visual Spectacle, and Global Media Culture* ed. Hester Baer and Jill Suzanne Smith (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) 180.

ways enables his complacency, as he can maintain his operating above the law, while reaping the benefits of resisting the system through her.

We see the other side of the coin though, that of the Bad German, when near the end of the first season, it is revealed that his partner, Bruno Wolter, belongs to the *Schwarze Reichswehr*, a true to life conspiratorial paramilitary group of veterans who sought to restore Germany's imperial glory. Having been introduced to high level *Schwarze Reichswehr* conspirators, rather than condemn or report Bruno, Rath is sympathetic to the soldiers' plight and shares that he lost his brother to the French during the German retreat. This commiseration is significant, as it acknowledges the shared traumatic past of German men—including Rath, the Good German, a stand-in for the everyday moral hero German cultural memory longs for—and its effect in breeding conspiratorial groups which would culminate in the Nazi party. Curiously, the show places the *Schwarze Reichswehr* and their failed plot to install an imperial dictatorship in 1929, contrary to its actual occurrence in 1923⁹⁴. Instead, by 1929, a remaining paramilitary element of the *Schwarze Reichswehr* (banned following their putsch), *Der Stahlhelm*, had swelled to become “a true national force” as it appealed to a younger, more radically *völkisch* audience.⁹⁵ While this altering of the timeline serves primarily for the show to move more quickly from this monarchist plot to the fascist one, it does leave room for Bruno to be a more sympathetic anti-democratic conspirator with whom Rath relates, not a Nazi. However, it simultaneously avoids engaging with another prominent

⁹⁴ William L. Shirer *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 65

⁹⁵ Brian E. Crim, *Antisemitism in the German Military Community and the Jewish Response, 1914-1938*, (Lanham, Maryland : Lexington Books, 2014), 56-57.

fascist movement that is revelatory of broader radicalization and complicity, which the Good German mythos avoids.

An additional character whose relationship to Rath serves his Good German construction is Reinhold Gräf, but his character points toward a broader notion: Berlin as a character. Gräf is rather tertiary; he is the crime scene photographer who we learn in the 4th episode performs drag and is a member of the (ostensibly) underground queer culture in Berlin. However, Gräf is only the most prominent of several characters and extras which represent this (in)famous facet of Berlin. Most recently celebrated and commemorated in the Netflix produced German documentary, *Eldorado*, the vibrant queer scene cannot be discussed without mention of Ernst Röhm—the openly gay leader of the SA stormtroopers who frequented these clubs—and the brutal decimation of (predominantly male) gay culture under the Nazis. However, the sexually liberated underground of *Babylon Berlin* and *Eldorado* feels prescient and surprisingly modern to audiences a century later. Moreover, the relationship of *Babylon Berlin* with this history, as documented in *Eldorado* is impressive, even giving a nod to a couple of the first trans women to receive gender-affirming surgery, noted members of the Hirschfeld Institute for Sexual Science, friends Charlotte Charlaque and Toni Ebel.⁹⁶ While we see Charlotte and Toni appear as sisters in *Babylon Berlin*, the effort undergone here to convey this history is impressive and genuine. Yet, it still serves a function in the construction of the Good German.

⁹⁶ “Charlotte Scharlaque, Schauspielerin,” Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft e.V., Berlin. <https://magnus-hirschfeld.de/gedenken/personen/charlaque-charlotte/> and “Toni Ebel, Malerin,” Magnus-Hirschfeld-Gesellschaft e.V., Berlin. <https://magnus-hirschfeld.de/gedenken/personen/ebel-toni/>.

A catholic Kölner officer of the Berlin police seems an unlikely ally to the metropolis' LGBTQ+ culture, but Rath is unperturbed to find himself in a queer jazz club face-to-face with this new colleague in drag. He is certainly not intolerant, despite working as a vice officer who operates in accordance with the law in the era of Paragraph 175 criminalizing male homosexuality. Rath's tacit acceptance of the exceptional Berlin subculture reads very optimistically at best, and anachronistic at worst. Serving only to further bolster the Good German image, the show's engagement with an often-underrepresented victim population of the impending Nazi genocide goes beyond the traditional exculpation from nationalist militarism in films guilty of this trope, such as *Im Westen Nichts Neues*. This serves not only modern demands for representation of queer history (and rightfully so), but also demands to redeem the German past of its specific LGBTQ+ persecution. Thus, the presence of Berliner queer life alludes to an absence of critical engagement with said persecution in past media of the Weimar Republic.

The Impending Doom of Weimar

The sense of impending doom is crucial to *Babylon Berlin*'s presentation of the Good German. As seen in *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, constructing this disaster may require fabrication, as the actual disaster of the era fails to conform with redemptive narratives. Just as the quiet end of World War I—and Paul Bäumer's life in the novel—did not serve the martyr narrative of Edward Berger's film, so too is the very public political ascension and ultimate democratic inauguration of the Nazi regime in need of revision for *Babylon Berlin*. The Nazi movement depicted is insidious and lacking in causality. Conversely, the show goes to great efforts to explore the Noir spirit of late

1920s to early 1930s Berlin (and the series is not unjust in doing so). Consequently, this deep homage to Weimar era film, art, and literature itself is cleverly and selectively used to impel doom.

As noted by cultural historian Camilla Smith, “for anyone familiar with early twentieth-century German art, many scenes in *Babylon Berlin* vividly recall works by prolific Weimar artists George Grosz, Heinrich Zille, Christian Schad, Jeanne Mammen, and Otto Dix.”⁹⁷ Beyond just the mise-en-scène of a Berlin bubbling over with “precarious social and economic realities,” Smith describes how the same exaggerated caricatures of “para-militarists” and “greedy industrialists” like Colonel Wendt and Alfred Nyssen are easily recognizable to anyone familiar with Weimar art.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the seemingly contrived episodic plots of a washed-up actress’ return to Babelsberg, or the black market abortion clinic ran by a poor woman, are steeped in the sociopolitical affairs of 1920s Berlin. Within the mise-en-scène, this connection is drawn with contemporary artworks that are often snuck into the show itself.⁹⁹ As the alleyway of Lotte’s apartment echoes with Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil’s *Die Morität von Mackie Messer*, the connections *Babylon Berlin* draws with Weimar culture’s expressions of social discontent, disarray, and disillusionment can be no clearer.

However, while the Weimar creatives often imagined society teetering on the edge of

⁹⁷ Camilla Smith, “From Kahn to Kollwitz: Exploring the Significance of Art and Visual Culture in *Babylon Berlin*” in *Babylon Berlin, German Visual Spectacle, and Global Media Culture* ed. Hester Baer and Jill Suzanne Smith (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) 105.

⁹⁸ Smith, “From Kahn to Kollwitz”, 105.

⁹⁹ Smith, “From Kahn to Kollwitz”, 115.

something good or evil, *Babylon Berlin* utilizes the ‘feel’ of Weimar cultural media as backdrop to a fatalist plunge toward genocidal fascism:

The extent to which the series presents culture as a contributing factor in the rise of the right is perhaps self-evident in its name. The formidable city of Babylon conjures fabled notions of prodigious wealth and power. But it is the city’s hubris of tower building that appears to symbolize the belief that Germany’s attempt at democracy would inevitably fail. [...] However, the disintegration of the Weimar Republic did not happen overnight. Debates regarding the value of parliamentarism and social and sexual reforms were enduring. And so, too, were debates regarding culture.¹⁰⁰

Season three opens *in media res* as Rath stumbles through the halls of the Berlin stock exchange, quivering in shock, we hear stockbrokers wailing as one shoots himself, and another hangs amid fluttering, now worthless stock sheets. This dramatization of the “Black Thursday” crash of 1929 looms over the season as the episode jumps to five weeks before, and with it looms the rise of Nazism. Of course, this stock market crash piled onto the economic desperation of Interwar Germany to form one catalyst in the rise of fascism, however the degree to which this crash contributed to the economic downturn of Germany is drastically hyperbolized here. Germany in fact saw comparatively low decline following this crash in comparison to European nations and of course the US. Moreover, Germany faced steeper economic crashes in 1927 and 1931.¹⁰¹ More still, the collective suicides portrayed were likely inspired by the stories of Wall Street “jumpers” in the United States, which were largely sensationalized as “the

¹⁰⁰ Smith, “From Kahn to Kollwitz”, 120.

¹⁰¹ Andrea Sommariva and Giuseppe Tullio, “The German Depression and the Stock Market Crash of the Thirties: The Role of Macropolicies and of the International Business Cycle.” *Journal of Banking & Finance* 13, no. 4 (1989), 525.

number of suicide leaps in Wall Street during this period was a mere two.”¹⁰² Thus, we can likely conclude that given the relative modesty of the Black Thursday crash in Germany and the sensationalism surrounding the meager two instances in the economic devastation of the US, suicides as such were nonexistent. However, *Babylon Berlin* is touching upon a larger phenomenon of suicide in the Weimar Republic. The German suicide rate was higher than that of the US, Great Britain, and France, only increasing in the years following the crash and “undoubtedly symptomatic of mass unemployment and welfare cuts.”¹⁰³ But here, a myth is perpetuated of a cataclysmic crash in the late 1920s Germany, from which the Nazis would benefit.

Alfred Nyssen, a young heir to a steel industry empire, is presented as the only person to have seen the instability of the stock market and predicted this cataclysmic crash. In a meeting with some trusted members of the upper class, Nyssen explains his theory, asking for a massive investment to short the stock market en masse, to fund a political revolution. He is laughed at by all except Colonel Wendt, the enduring villain of the show, a conservative politician gaining rank in the Reich Ministry of Justice through his secret plots with the *Schwarze Reichswehr* and now, the Nazis. Wendt believes Nyssen and agrees. When we catch up to the crash alluded to in the first episode of season three at the finale, Nyssen, and more importantly his Nazi supporters, have made billions in the economic catastrophe. Notably, Nyssen is undoubtedly based

¹⁰² Bennett Lowenthal, “The Jumpers of ‘29” *The Washington Post*, October 24th, 1987. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1987/10/25/the-jumpers-of-29/17defff9-f725-43b7-831b-7924ac0a1363/>.

¹⁰³ Moritz Föllmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009), 196.

on Fritz Thyssen, the steel empire heir and early financier of the Nazi party.¹⁰⁴ However, Nyssen's and the Nazis' betting against the economic downturn presents a scenario in which German society is crippled while the evil empire is enriched. This plot serves to construct a determinist gamble, in which the rise of Nazism is not a result of the popularity and continued financial support of industrialists, but luck and manipulation of the German economy.

Underlying and yet underplayed in *Babylon Berlin* is the role of politics in the Weimar Republic. We progressively see power slip through the clenched fist of the SPD toward Nazism, as the Communists (KPD), at least as they are portrayed here, fade away. Notably, none of the major characters are politically aligned or active despite all those around them, and the political hotbed which they engage in. In the second season Rath, Charlotte, and Gräf foiled a Communist plot rearming the Luftwaffe of the conservative imperialist *Schwarze Reichswehr* in exchange for chemical weapons, an imagined plot based on the Lipezk secret flight school in Russia.¹⁰⁵ Despite this, and having to kill his own traitorous partner Bruno Wolter in the process, Gereon Rath and company remain neutral. In fact, when Rath's nephew Moritz asks permission to attend a Nazi Youth camp, Rath demonstrates great ignorance of the movement, viewing the indoctrination exercise as something akin to an innocent boy scout outing. Even Charlotte defies her own abject poverty and proletarian milieu to remain politically

¹⁰⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 144.

¹⁰⁵ BArch, "Lipezk. Die geheime Fliegerschule und Erprobungsstätte der Reichswehr in der Sowjetunion," Virtuelle Ausstellung, Bundesarchiv, Berlin, Germany. <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Content/Virtuelle-Ausstellungen/Lipezk-Die-Geheime-Fliegerschule-Und-Erprobungsstatte-Der-Reichswehr-In-Der-Sowjetunion/lipezk-die-geheime-fliegerschule-und-erprobungsstatte-der-reichswehr-in-der-sowjetunion.html>

unaligned. However, we do see her friend Greta corrupted by the political tumult of the times.

Greta falls for a charming young man, Fritz, a seemingly devout Communist seeking retribution for the police massacre of *Blutmai*. Fortunately, Greta's occupation as a domestic servant of the Police Chief, August Benda, presents a dramatic opportunity. Following a possible staged police assassination of Fritz outside the KPD headquarters, Greta is propositioned by his friend in the third season to retaliate by planting a bomb in Benda's home office. She acquiesces. In a parallel shot, Benda and his young daughter are killed as Greta sees Fritz at a train station... in SA uniform! As punishment for breaking bad in succumbing to the pulls of a Communist? Fascist? Greta's punishment is state execution, which she accepts in her self-critical reflection as a corrupted German who committed political assassination and murder. A brutal but understandable end for a character who gives presence to those average Germans corrupted by ignorance and the turmoil of the era to commit politically-motivated crime for the Nazis. However, the general absence of corrupted Good Germans in *Babylon Berlin*, much less those who live, enables a parapractic obfuscation which displays social degradation, without reflecting its scope and scale. Additionally, Greta's being duped by a Fascist masquerading as a Communist adds another retrospective parapraxis.

Horseshoe theory connections of the radical left and right in this plot line only punctuate the need of our central characters to remain apolitical. Apathetically centrist adherence to a deteriorating Weimar status quo serves several purposes in the Good German narrative. First, leading characters sympathetic to the radical left, be it the KPD or otherwise, begin to engage with another boogeyman of post-reunification Germany:

Communists. Between the brutality of the Soviet occupation and authoritarianism of the DDR—which many German viewers and even writers/producers likely experienced—communist sympathies would largely fall flat. Second, keeping characters dispassionately centrist enables a strawman conception of the Weimar public which portrays common political inactivism among the police officers and proletarians. This is all the more unfathomable in the capital of an “intensely political” Weimar Germany that is steeped in “burning political issues that infiltrated virtually every corner of German life from 1919-1933.”¹⁰⁶ This provides a false sense of fringe takeover just a year before the “largest popular vote yet recorded in any election in Germany”¹⁰⁷ at 82% turnout in which the NSDAP became the second-largest party. Lastly, there is the issue of making a central character a Nazi. Enter the archetypical fascist: a young WWI veteran, who lost his brother in the German retreat, and finds themselves an investigator of political enemies of the state: Gereon Rath.

The Failure of the Good German

The first episode of season 4, set in the post-election period of 1930, we see Rath in SA uniform, leading an attack on Jewish businesses of the prominent Kurfürstendamm. Charlotte, now in an on-again-off-again relationship with Rath, is coincidentally sent to investigate another crime nearby. She is appalled when she bumps into brownshirt Rath. The next day, after being confronted by Charlotte, he affirms his

¹⁰⁶ Larry Eugene Jones, “Culture and Politics in the Weimar Republic” in *Modern Germany Reconsidered: 1870-1945*, ed. Gordon Martel, (Routledge, 1992), 74.

¹⁰⁷ James K. Pollock, “The German Reichstag Elections of 1930.” *The American Political Science Review* 24, no. 4 (1930), 989. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1946755>.

dormant Nazi values. She declares her disgust, and states that he is dead to her. With this, the notion of Gereon Rath as the Good German completely dissolves. *Babylon Berlin* has broken the mold, making fans fall in love with a German who is at one point a good person, and the next a fascist domestic terrorist.

Or so we may hope. While such a subversion of the Good German trope would perhaps better reflect the reality of many everyday, or even exceptional, Germans developing into Nazis, this notion is immediately cast aside. Rath leaves the interaction with Charlotte to vomit from anxiety. He is a double agent for the police chief. Working within the SA under Walther Stennes, a real-life leader of the Berlin SA, Rath is tasked with sowing discord between the Berlin SA and Hitler's loyal SS, led by Wendt. Now head of the political police, and gunning to be Chief of the entire bureau, Wendt can be read as another historical figure, that of Rudolf Diels. Diels had slowly climbed the ranks of the Weimar SiPo, earning favor with the Nazis—despite not being an official member until 1937—for his staunch anti-communist stance and aide to the NSDAP. He was promoted to head of the political police by Hermann Göring himself in 1933, shortly thereafter the SiPo was renamed the Gestapo.¹⁰⁸ Beyond their substantial career similarities, Wendt even shares Diels' distinct facial dueling scars. However, there is a creative license taken with Wendt that is unfamiliar to Diels: his queerness.

Perhaps referring to SA chief Ernst Röhm's previously mentioned open homosexuality, Wendt's queerness, specifically bisexuality, is presented differently than the celebrated underground of Berlin—as a weakness. A major plot point of the fourth

¹⁰⁸ Anthony Read, *The Devils Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003, 280-281.

season, as Rath aids Stennes' SA against Wendt's SS, is collecting blackmail evidence of his gay sexual encounters. Curiously, this evidence is collected by Gräf, the queer photographer who catches Stennes at a gay cruising park *in flagrante delicto*. The notable discomfort on Gräf's face can be read both as remorse for betraying gay solidarity by potentially ratting someone out, but also as a disgust toward a queer Nazi who would come to persecute their own. Rather than participating in the glamorous nightlight Röhm was known to frequent, Wendt is imagined as a deeply closeted traitor of Nazi and queer alike. An interesting reimagination of the known womanizer that Diels was, Wendt's bisexuality is used as a weapon against the Nazi persecution of homosexuality, which was tolerated for elites like Röhm until internal politics rendered him a threat.

As the show grows closer to the Third Reich, it grows further from its root of illustrating the rise of Nazism amidst the trauma of interwar Berlin, to remain as exculpatory as possible. Various storylines of the fourth season are increasingly detached from Weimar reality, while appealing to perceived needs of German cultural memory. A stolen Rothschild jewel is forcibly reclaimed from the Nyssen family by a Jewish-American gangster, thus stolen Jewish treasure is repatriated—albeit through kidnapping and violence at the hands of one of the few Jewish characters. In fact, up to season four, only “one Jewish character (Benda) carri[e]d an extraordinary burden on his shoulders, standing in for the entire spectrum of interwar German Jewry, with the exception of a few fleeting glimpses of black-hatted orthodox men.”¹⁰⁹ While the fourth

¹⁰⁹ Paul Lerner and Veronika Fuechtner, “Babylon Berlin: Media, Spectacle, and History.” *Central European History* 53, no. 4 (2020): 841.

season engaged a bit more with these tertiary orthodox Jews, depicting them as an insular community, abused and exploited by the gentiles of Germany, their only means of retribution are through a Jewish-American criminal, who in turn serves antisemitic stereotypes. Here there is a notable absence of influential Jewish communities in the arts and Berlin culture, but also the assimilated Jews of the metropolis. It has not gone unnoticed that *Babylon Berlin* consciously avoids “virtually all evidence of Jews in 1929 Berlin beyond the incidental.”¹¹⁰ The parapraxis of absence attempted here would avoid aligning Jewish life with the same imminent demise faced by German democracy in the series, but unfortunately only “reinscribes and thus once again reifies the representation of Jewish life as only emblematic of tragedy.”¹¹¹

Contrasting the lack of Jewish history and life in Berlin, the show maintains its archive effect throughout the fourth season, even as the subplots grow increasingly histrionic. In the latter half of the season, Rath is an early test subject of Pervitin, the amphetamine that fueled the Wehrmacht (which historically did not even begin development until after Hitler’s election).¹¹² This is but one of a series of pseudo-psychoanalytical exams Rath undertakes at the hands of Dr. Schmidt, the mysterious figure who hypnotizes and drugs veterans including Rath ostensibly to help them overcome their post-traumatic stress. In an ironic twist, it is revealed that Dr. Schmidt is actually Rath’s brother Anno, who Rath believed he left for dead on the battlefield.

¹¹⁰ Darcy Buerkle, “The City (Almost) without Jews” in *Babylon Berlin, German Visual Spectacle, and Global Media Culture* ed. Hester Baer and Jill Suzanne Smith (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) 158.

¹¹¹ Buerkle, 158.

¹¹² Stephen Snelders and Toine Pieters, “Speed in the Third Reich: Methamphetamine (Pervitin) Use and a Drug History From Below” *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 24, No. 3, 687-688.

Anno's transformation into Dr. Schmidt—unrecognized by Rath for several seasons due to his facial burns received in combat—is an important marker for a Good German turned bad. Schmidt openly rejects his past as Anno, including Rath's brotherhood, and his own wife and child. As what amounts to a new person, Schmidt is now free to do what Anno, Rath's beloved brother, could not: reveal he is building a fascist paramilitary force of essentially brainwashed veterans. Once again, we see a firm line drawn between Rath's personal circle and (alluded) Nazism, as a sympathetic Nazi presents complications to the Good German binaries established. Meanwhile, the Good German Charlotte finds herself in dire financial need and joins a dance marathon to win a thousand marks. What ensues is a metaphorical Danse Macabre of normal civilian life in Germany, as desperation inevitably leads to fascism and loss of innocence. Similarly condemned, *Babylon Berlin* as a series cannot run much longer.

While quite different from the TV series, the novels remain incomplete, with a final tenth book yet to be written. However, the ninth novel seems to suggest the series ends either with the departure of Rath and Charlotte (and whoever they can save) to the US, or their death, but it has been clarified that the series will end with Kristallnacht in November 1938.¹¹³ Co-creator of the TV Series Tom Tykwer expressed hopes for a similar longevity of the show in 2017, claiming that the show is “here for a decade at least.”¹¹⁴ However, more recent interviews such as that of Liv Lisa Fries (Charlotte), who explained the fifth and “last season” of *Babylon Berlin* would be filmed at the end

¹¹³ Jan Sternberg, “Volker Kutscher: ‘Für viele meiner Figuren wird es nicht gut ausgehen’”, *Redaktions netzwerk Deutschland*, November 2nd, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Melanie Goodfellow, “Tom Tykwer: ‘Babylon Berlin’ could run for another decade,” *Screendaily*, April 3rd, 2017.

of 2024.¹¹⁵ Despite the significant deviations in story between the novel and series, they share a same fate resultant of their insistence upon the Good German narrative. The author's decision to end with Kristallnacht provides a clear delineation: Good Germans like Gereon Rath cannot remain complacent with the regime while remaining "Good" or "German." As a police officer working under the same roof as the Gestapo, he can either be complicit, or find himself an enemy of the state to be interned at a concentration camp, or killed. Alternatively, as the novels suggest, Rath can flee, renouncing, in some effect, his Germanhood. Similarly, the Rath of the TV series cannot hold the myth of the Good German of Weimar much longer, as the causality of such a character is already determined: to fail.

Stories of the Good German are doomed to this fate. To construct noble Germans who could have existed, therefore serving the subconscious hope of German collective memory, at some point, these characters must fail. Unfortunately, films and shows which portray noble Germans of the era such as Sophie Scholl, the Rosenstrasse women, or the numerous resistance forces, fail to assuage the guilt amassed by millions of Germans who were not active dissenters, nor prominent perpetrators. Here the cultural imagination of the post-war generations can help to overcome the past by excusing their (great/grand)mothers and (great/grand)fathers as passive protestors. Critical analysis reveals not only the false premise, but the problematic psychology behind, and propagated by, these narratives.

¹¹⁵ Andreas Wiseman, "'Babylon Berlin' Star Gives Update of Series Five After Sky Exit," *Deadline*, February 8th, 2024.

Chapter 3: *Der vermessene Mensch*

Dr. Hoffman had traveled the length of the globe and witnessed death and destruction of colleagues, soldiers, and civilians. He had survived a grazing bullet to the head, dehydration, and heat exhaustion lost in the Kalahari Desert all to find Kezia Kambazembi, his former ethnological specimen. Now held at Shark Island—a concentration camp, Kezia is a prisoner within the cruel system of the Herero and Nama genocide. A stinking hut at the top of a hill pulls Dr. Hoffman in as he rushes to his kismet. In the film's penultimate scene he sees her, head shaven, tears streaming as she cuts the boiled flesh from the endless supply of anonymous Nama and Herero skulls. At the sight, Dr. Hoffman flees the camp and Namibia, with the realization that these skulls are marked for one destination, the very same place for which he defiled graves: the Berlin Ethnological Museum.

Director Lars Kraume's 2023 film *Der vermessene Mensch* may be the first introduction through German film to the 1904-1908 genocide in Deutsch-Südwestafrika (modern-day Namibia). The film's graphic depiction of General Lothar von Trotha's brutal annihilation campaign against the native Herero and Nama uprisings mark a pivotal moment: that in which the world can see another German genocide represented. Although the film has yet to see release outside German-speaking countries, it premiered at the Berlinale, Germany's principal film festival, in March 2023 to some praise.¹¹⁶ Additionally, several government organizations awarded the film a combined 3,392,105

¹¹⁶ "Der vermessene Mensch," *FBW*, https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/der_vermessen_mensch

euros toward production, likely a result of the film's cultural heft.¹¹⁷ While my own contacts with the film's international distribution company, Picture Tree Films, has given little idea of the picture's fate in US and international release, the film has begun to draw attention in academic spheres outside of Germany.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, given the historical magnitude of the film and the obvious benefits of wider international release, it seems only a matter of time until the film is available for streaming within the broader world.

What draws both domestic and international audiences here is the familiar performance of German genocide, but it is undertaken in an unfamiliar context. Rather than pursuing a new means of representing the moral dilemmas and failings of bystanders and perpetrators or even small victories of victims, Kraume falls into the comfortable trope of Holocaust representation: the Good German. What should be hailed as a spotlight for larger patterns of modern genocide committed by industrialized nations, instead is a film which preemptively frames the events in the marred discourse of apologia, rationalization, and individual helplessness or ineffectuality in the face of state violence.

¹¹⁷ Data found itemized under "Projektdaten" in "Der vermessene Mensch" *crew united*, https://www.crew-united.com/de/Der-vermessene-Mensch_260120.html#!&tabctl_15249142_activeTab=1189721449

¹¹⁸ See screenings and panel discussions at Indiana and Arizona State University: American Friends of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (@AFAvH), "Together with @IndianaUniv and @hamiltonlugar AFAvH held a special screening of 'Der vermessene Mensch' - 'Measures of Men' at @IUcinema, about the atrocities of," X, April 18, 2024. <https://x.com/AFAvH/status/1780991233109688665> and "Rosenbluth Family Charitable Foundation Genocide Awareness Week", Arizona State University School of Historical, Philolosophical and Religious Studies, April 15-19, 2024. <https://shprs.asu.edu/gaw2024>.

Dr. Alexander Hoffman as the Good German

Dr. Hoffman is a post-doc assistant to a Professor Josef Ritter von Waldstätten, a leading ethnologist at the Friedrich Wilhelm University of Berlin, known today as Humboldt University. Hoffman hopes to follow in his late father's footsteps to study the world's remaining "*Wilden*," savages. Although we learn Hoffman's father was killed and posited to have been eaten by cannibals in Africa (a common stereotype of colonial Germany), he is unshaken in his desire to travel the world and understand *die Wilden*, sharing his fear that modernization will soon render their cultures extinct. With the arrival of a 'delegation' of Herero and Nama people including the son, Friedrich, of the paramount Herero chief, Samuel Maharaero, Hoffman would receive his opportunity to study the people up close. However, what is a career-making opportunity for the Good German, is the beginning of a betrayal of the Herero and Nama.

Historically, there were five Herero and four Nama people brought to Berlin in 1896. However, they were not invited to discuss the geopolitical tensions of the region as they had hoped, but instead were 9 of 103 African members of the Treptower Park *Colonial-Ausstellung* (colonial exhibition) or *Völkerschau*, effectively a human zoo.¹¹⁹ By 1896, Namibia had been under German colonial rule for 12 years, during which unsuccessful acquisition of Herero and Nama pastoral land had led to armed conflict, nearly ousting the small, but belligerent German forces. A newly appointed *Reichkommissar*, Theodor Leutwein, began to pursue pacifist means of establishing a

¹¹⁹ Deutsches Historischen Museums, "11. Treptow: Die Deutsche Colonial-Ausstellung von 1896 im Treptower Park," *Afrika in Berlin - ein Stadtspaziergang des Deutschen Historischen Museums*, <https://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/namibia/stadtspaziergang/treptow.htm>.

white colony, partnering with Samuel Maherero, whose position as preeminent chief was in question.¹²⁰ Perhaps it is within this historical context that the film's rendition of Friedrich Maherero and company agreed to travel to Berlin. In seeking to speak with Kaiser Wilhelm directly, they found themselves subjects of ethnographic study and public gawking.

Dr. Hoffman is immediately taken with Kezia Kambazembi, the German translator for the Herero delegation. Over several weeks of study and failed attempts at romance, Hoffman puts forth his thesis to von Waldstätten and his peers: that Africans are not of inferior intellect or capacity. The direct challenge to the entire institution of German ethnography is summarily laughed off. Von Waldstätten warns Hoffman that such theories will be a swift end to his hopes of replacing the elder professor. Shortly thereafter, the Namibian delegation holds a brief audience with the Kaiser offscreen, requesting a (doubtful) promise that their lands and property will be returned. Shortly afterward, Kezia departs, leaving Hoffman to bear his unrequited love and seemingly failed study. Several years later, Hoffman is now working as assistant to his eugenicist colleague, Dr. Wendenburg, whose lessons affirm the status quo of white supremacy via phrenology and Social Darwinism. After the revolts begin in Deutsche-Südwestafrika, Professor von Waldstätten requests to send a researcher to collect artifacts for the University's ethnological museum—implicitly, before they are gone. Of course, he sends his protégé, Wendenburg, while Hoffman sees his opportunity and offers to tag along.

¹²⁰ Dominik J. Schaller, "From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa" in *Empire, Colony Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* ed. Dirk Moses (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008) 298-300.

The Good German now finds himself off to a war zone to disprove white supremacy and win the heart of an African woman.

Samuel Maherero forsook the partnership and treaties with Colonial Governor Leutwein in early 1904, joining the uprising started by the Bondelswartz Nama following the murder of their chief by German soldiers in October 1903.¹²¹ Asking for an explanation of this apparent betrayal, Leutwein received a response from Maherero in March 1904 which clarified his position: “I did not commence the war this year; it has been started by the white people; for as you know how many Hereros have been killed by white people, particularly traders, with rifles and in the prisons.”¹²² In the several months following this declaration of rebellion, the German government found Leutwein’s soft-handed policies to blame, and sent the bellicose General Lothar von Trotha to take exclusive military command of the colony.¹²³ Despite brutal military victories through the summer of 1904, von Trotha was incensed at the Herero and Nama’s ability to escape complete encirclement and pacification. As a response, in October, he commanded genocide to begin: “The Herero people must leave the country. If the nation doesn’t do this I will force them with the *Groot Rohr* [cannon]. Within the German borders every Herero, with or without gun, with or without cattle will be shot. I will no longer accept women and children[...].”¹²⁴ Within just months of a four-year long genocidal campaign,

¹²¹ Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 97-99.

¹²² Samuel Maherero to Governor Leutwein, March 6, 1904, in *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, edited by Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald. Leiden: Brill, 2003, 99.

¹²³ Domnick Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide” in *Empire, Colony Genocide*, 303.

¹²⁴ Proclamation by Lothar von Trotha (copy), October 2, 1904, Bundesarchiv Berlin Lichterfelde, R1001/2098, 7-8 qtd. in Domnick Schaller, “From Conquest to Genocide” in *Empire, Colony Genocide*, 304.

the Herero and Nama were on the back foot, pushed at threat of death into the lethal Kalahari, stripped of land, food, and water by German *Schutztruppen* (colonial protection forces).

The film's ethnographers, Hoffman and Wendenburg are attached to a squad of such *Schutztruppen*, who are particularly interested in Hoffman's familiarity with Friedrich Maharero, son of the chief and war-leader. The troops take the doctors on a reconnaissance mission to identify the location of the Mahereros, where Dr. Wendenburg is bitten by a deadly black mamba. Fearing the squad will be discovered as a result of the doctor's panic, a First Lieutenant Wolf von Crensky suffocates him. Rushing to report von Crensky's assault of his own countryman—more so a concern of Hoffman's than the murder of a colleague—the ethnographer is quickly informed of the gravity of the ongoing conflict and its outweighing of scientific research by General von Trotha himself. Within the context of the academic's brutal and sudden death, accompanied by the military's apathy, an important dynamic between Hoffman and the Herero is lost. Hoffman clearly has no qualms pointing out the chief and son of the revolt to soldiers pursuing a genocidal campaign. Nevertheless, he expresses a belief that he will act as negotiator between the Herero and German military. Digging into this idea reveals an enduring quality of Hoffman's character, as his increasingly shameful decisions expose either profound naïveté or willful blindness borne of self-interest. It is precisely this dynamic which appears to push the notion of the Good German to its limits of the ethical binary, but fails to cross the line, maintaining the narrative device's integrity.

Our second instance of this line-blurring between excusable ignorance and condemnable greed comes the following night. Dr. Hoffman sneaks out of the military

camp to meet with Friederich Maherero privately to see if he knows Kezia's location. Already we see a marked shift, or rather exposure of his true motivations, as his interest in the prince of the Herero is less so focused on getting an intimate look at their culture facing eradication, but rather on a singular woman. Again, his pursuit reveals an equally ignorant and self-interested belief that he can romance and save Kezia. Unfortunately, reality strikes when Hoffman finds himself accosted by Herero soldiers, who tie the mysterious white man up, and prepare to execute him, only to be interrupted by artillery fire. In their flight, one soldier quickly turns around, and shoots Hoffman in the head. Of course, our protagonist is only wounded by the grazing shot, as he awakens sometime later, bloodied and sun-baked. In the interim, a nearby village of Herero and Nama civilians, including Kezia and her family, was indiscriminately shelled by the Germans, killing countless innocents. Stumbling into the charred village, over bodies, Dr. Hoffman is visibly horrified, at least for a moment.

How the genocide in Deutsche-Südwestafrika exactly was conducted is a foggy image at best. While primary sources are few, and near universally shaped by bias, statistical analysis and investigations like the 1918 Blue Book give some shape to the mass murder. This Blue Book was published by the British government following the post-WWI occupation of German Namibia and collected dozens of victims' testimonies to better understand colonial rule in the nation, and likely, further denounce the Germans while uplifting the liberating British. Of course, the work is rife with biases. Between the quotes of eyewitnesses is undeniable language of emotional appeals on behalf of the Africans and harsh censure of the cruel Germans—ironic, coming from the notoriously tender-hearted British Empire. Despite the dubious context, these testimonies, German

military documents, and population statistics share common insights. First, German soldiers initially killed perhaps “thousands and thousands” by gunfire, including women and children.¹²⁵ Second, as many as “half the Herero” or “the greatest part” of them, died from their forced displacement in the Kalahari Desert.¹²⁶ Third, those imprisoned by the Germans in concentration camps were worked to death, with *Schutztruppen* documents placing the mortality rate of the camps at 45 percent.¹²⁷

Witnessing but the earliest means of extermination to be implemented in Namibia, Dr. Hoffman’s shock at the shelled village quickly dissipates. Spotting an unscathed hut nearby, he quickly begins looting various cultural artifacts from the home. Still, the motivation for this heinous act is unclear given Hoffman’s character. Is this genuine interest and preservation of Herero culture, or a greedy grab for academic promotion and status? At his return to the military camp, Hoffman is greeted by von Crensky. The lieutenant had clearly tracked his excursion and examined the doctor’s loot. He then issues the aspirant professor an offer. Von Crensky will not only allow, but enable the looting, in return for a share of the profits. Hoffman scoffs at the offer from his colleague’s killer, but is quickly made clear of the situation. Von Crensky threatens to accuse the doctor of sneaking off in the night to aid the enemy (the Mahereros). Thus, the deal with the devil is made. Here we see the introduction of coercion to the motivations of the young doctor, a powerful tool in exculpatory reasoning for his continued actions.

¹²⁵ Jeremy Silvester and Jan-Bart Gewald, *Words Cannot Be Found: German Colonial Rule in Namibia An Annotated Reprint of the 1918 Blue Book*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 117.

¹²⁶ Paul Rohrbach and Major Ludwig von Estorff, respectively, qtd. in Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 89.

¹²⁷ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 89.

Quickly, Hoffman sends the artifacts to Berlin, pleasing Professor von Waldstätten, who asks for the next greatest attraction—Herero and Nama skulls.

The innumerable stolen skulls and defiled graves of the German colonies in Africa are an ongoing source of obvious disgust and international contention. Particularly in the case of Namibia, where skulls were almost certainly sourced en masse from the victims of genocide, by perpetrators or bystanders, and for use in upholding supremacist theories which enabled the genocide. With the ongoing calls for reparations and repatriation of remains to Namibia,¹²⁸ Gerhard Ziegenfuß, a 77-year-old retired biology teacher in Germany, experienced a living engagement with the cultural memory of the genocide. Ziegenfuß, whom one could call an average German, is heir to a Namibian skull:

There is a family legend in Gerhard Ziegenfuß's parents house: In 1900, Ziegenfuß's great-uncle went to the then colony of German-Southwest Africa as a missionary[...] When the colonial war breaks out, he is drafted as a chaplain and looks after the troops as a pastor. The family legend goes that the skull belonged to a chief and was given to Father Alois Ziegenfuß as a gift by a converted tribe.¹²⁹

The Ziegenfuß family legend exposes first, the utter nonexistence of regulation in acquiring remains—a legal void which endures for those in possession of the remains, university or not. Second, it is likely a sanitized story of the skull's acquisition. While the image of a wartime gift of a skull to a priest attached to the Schutztruppe seems far-fetched enough, Gerhard's family was known to share great-uncle Alois' stories and

¹²⁸ "Germany returns skulls of Namibian genocide victims," *BBC*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45342586>

¹²⁹ Elisabeth Kimmerle, "Wem gehört der Schädel?" *Die Tageszeitung*, February 4th, 2018. <https://taz.de/Im-Kolonialismus-geraubte-Koerperteile/!5479447/>

diary entries of the “war against die Wilden.”¹³⁰ Far more likely is that the family heirloom is a war trophy, of a completely unknown person. The parallel of Alois Ziegenfuß’s legend to the filmic Good German is an uncanny example of myriad stories of family members since passed, remembered as brighter characters in a dark chapter in German history.

In an alternative (and more likely) conception of these skulls acquisition, von Crensky’s unit—accompanied by Hoffman—finds itself defending an oasis in the desert, as women and children are spotted walking toward the water they desperately need. Following in von Trotha’s genocide order, von Crensky and his men begin forming lines of fire to kill the innocents. Seeing this, Hoffman attempts to dissuade the lieutenant. Von Crensky offers a compromise, Hoffman can shoot one, in the hopes of scaring the others off. He instead fires in the air, which fails to dissuade the displaced and dying people. Von Crensky then takes the shot, killing a woman, and sending the others running, and informing the doctor that now, they will die of thirst instead of a quick death by bullets. Following another moment of desensitization, Hoffman acquiesces to his mentor’s request when the unit comes across a mass grave in the desert. Gagging, he hacks off the decaying heads of the victims with a shovel. Despite sinking to a new low, the young doctor is offered some semblance of moral redemption that night. While cleaning the collected skulls, he offers food and water to several wandering Herero and Nama children who came across their camp. Shortly after accepting, the children catch a glimpse of the

¹³⁰ Kimmerle, “Wem gehört der Schädel?”.

bones behind the doctor, fleeing the “*Weiss Doktor!*” (White Doctor). Although an unsuccessful interaction, Hoffman is clearly separated from his genocide companions.

While the Good German, in this case Hoffman, cannot murder innocents outright, he is not free from violence. Shortly after this jarring encounter, Professor von Waldstätten visits the colony, meeting with Hoffman at a glamorous club in a settler city, staffed by Africans. Here von Waldstätten again pushes the bounds further, requesting older remains with which to compare the contemporary—that is, he must rob ancestral tombs. Of course, Hoffman obliges. Von Crensky and his men escort Hoffman to a tomb in the night, only to be attacked by naturally incensed Herero rebels. In the gunfire, von Crensky and his men are killed or flee, leaving one surviving Herero and the scrawny ethnologist hiding in the tomb. When the armed Herero soldier steps into the threshold, Hoffman fires, and kills the rebel.

Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators Imagined

What *Der Vermessne Mensch* explores more than the other media in this work is the extent to which the Good German can remain Good. That is, it pinpoints the lines between victims, bystanders and perpetrators. While the Good German Hoffman’s hands are now bloodied, this act of self-defense is still separated from the murderous acts of von Crensky, von Trotha, and the colonial military generally. Broadly speaking, the ethnologist’s actions still comfortably fall into the acceptable casualties of “insurgents,” despite the context of said casualty. Of course, Hoffman’s looting of artifacts and human remains places him beyond the category of victim, which could arguably be the situation of someone like Dr. Wegener, for all his faults. Conversely, the Good German is aware of

the depths of crime surrounding them, even complicit in moral misdemeanors, but he is not the engine or supporter of the evil empire.

With respect to this story centered on Dr. Alexander Hoffman, a white German ethnologist, the Black Artists in German Film organization (*Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V.*) has levied an open statement against the film. Within their public statement, the claim is made that the film examines the genocide “exclusively from the perspective of the perpetrators [...] regulating the actual genocide of the OvaHerero and Nama to the background.” Lumped in with two other films accused of anti-Blackness, the primary qualm of the film is its choice of narration: the Good German. However, their identification of Hoffman as a perpetrator is reductive. Citing an article by Vivien Buchhorn in their address, they quote: “In this protection mode, the perpetrator sometimes becomes a victim, the professor sometimes becomes a buddy, the ethnologist in love sometimes becomes sensitive, and the brutal officer in the desert sometimes becomes a contractual partner.”¹³¹ In Buchhorn’s assessment, I would argue a clear delineation drawn between the ethnologist misguided by love and ignorance into committing crimes enabled by, but not in aid to the genocide of his “contractual partner.” Rather than an overt anti-Blackness, the film serves a subtle German guilt. Certainly, the picture is not exploratory of the Nama and Herero victims, as even Kezia herself is a poorly developed character. However, Hoffman’s/the Good German’s role is an extraordinary tale of an ‘ordinary’ German who finds himself increasingly complicit

¹³¹ Schwarze Filmschaffende e.V., “Public statement issued by the Schwarze Filmschaffende Afro-German film collective on the anti-Black films *Measure of Men*, *Seneca*, and *Helt Super!*” Berlin, April 17, 2023. <https://romatrial.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Public-Statement-Schwarze-Filmschaffende-English.pdf>

yet innocent to the crimes of the German past, simultaneously acting as a surrogate of average Germans.

Returning to real German complicity in the case of Alois Ziegenfuß, a presumptively similar case of stolen remains, we find further disconnect between the German reality and Namibian recompense. Despite seeking out numerous channels including the Namibian embassy and the Charité Human Remains Project, and even travelling to Windhoek himself, Alois' great-nephew Gerhard was unable to find a resting place for the Namibian skull. As "without historical sources, it is almost impossible to assign the bones to a population group," the organizations and representatives of the Nama and Herero were unwilling to accept the remains, for fear of false placement.¹³² Similar concerns have plagued the German government itself; although several small returns of bones have been made, the process has been painfully slow for both nations.¹³³

Despite the disparity in focus, the Schwarze Filmschaffende's concerns, the struggle of Gerhard Ziegenfuß, and the German government's predicament reveal a disconnect over which audience is being served by these reflections on the past. In the case of *Der Vermessene Mensch*, Gerhard's concerns for the skull, and the German government's atonement endeavours, Germans are served. For the Schwarze Filmschaffende and Namibian government, Namibians (and perhaps African victims of colonialism more broadly) are served. However, the inability of German film to properly

¹³² Elisabeth Kimmerle, "Wem gehört der Schädel?" *Die Tageszeitung*, February 4th, 2018. <https://taz.de/Im-Kolonialismus-geraubte-Koerperteile/!5479447/>

¹³³ "Germany returns skulls of Namibian genocide victims," *BBC*, August 29, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45342586>

reflect Namibian victims' stories is likely a microcosm of Germany's inability to properly reflect on the Herero and Nama genocide at this given point in time. To draw parallel to film historiography, perhaps the absence of Jews from German media of the immediate post-war can give insight to the delayed development of cultural memory and media representing the Namibian genocide.

Within the film, there is a fated return to the original subject of Hoffman's study, the victim, who unfortunately is scripted as the representative of all Namibian people: Kezia. In the final act of the film, Hoffman finally finds a lead to her location, through none other than her husband. It is worth noting that the white scientist's unrelenting romantic motivation is completely unfazed by that fact that Kezia has a husband and children, a highly unusual occurrence which points to a supremacist disregard for her marriage. The husband reveals she is held at Shark Island, the most brutal of concentration camps. Hoffman arrives in the neighboring Lüderitz at night, to receive entry to the camp in the morning. In his interactions with the warden, lists of names and numbers are immediately reminiscent of such documents in Holocaust films, from camps such as Auschwitz. That morning, the doctor, with sunken, dark, and exhausted eyes charges up the hill toward the stinking shack. Upon sight of Kezia peeling the flesh from boiled Namibian skulls, Hoffman flees not only Shark Island, but the colony itself.

Understandings of the German concentration camp system in Namibia are as opaque as those of the genocide itself. Initially, there was no top-down order for imprisonment of the Herero and Nama. Instead, the policy began as a result of a Berlin

order to von Trotha for less violent means of dealing with surrendered natives.¹³⁴ What followed in January 1905 was a reluctant agreement to send all surrendered Herero (even the men) to the major cities for distribution to emergent prison and labor camps. Prisoners were to be labelled with badges and inspected once daily by troops accompanying missionaries.¹³⁵ Within the year, the overall camp population would multiply over threefold as von Trotha was replaced as de facto leader of the colony by Friedrich von Lindequist, a more level-headed imperial bureaucrat. What in Berlin seemed to be a more humane means of dealing with the Herero and Nama turned inhumane, fast. Overpopulation of already entirely malnourished people led to mass starvation and disease. Supply was entirely insufficient: food, clothing, and housing was stretched to the point of universal suffering.¹³⁶ The new system had become profoundly deadly: “Whereas the annual death rate among Africans incarcerated in the city jail for 1903 and 1904 was 1.7 percent, the prisoner camp had in just the last two weeks of May [1905] compiled a death rate of 10 percent. Annually that was enough to wipe out the entire camp population two and a half times over.”¹³⁷

Finding Kezia was not Alexander Hoffman’s first foray into this camp system. He had encountered another earlier in the film. While he was visibly shocked by the condition of its inhabitants, generously offering a can of food to just a single prisoner, he conducted phrenology measurements of the victims. As disgusting as this ‘scientific pursuit’ appears, Hoffman does express earlier in his meeting with Prof. von Waldstätten

¹³⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 70-71.

¹³⁵ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 72.

¹³⁶ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 75-78.

¹³⁷ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 76

his hopes to publish his thesis proving there is no phrenological difference between Germans and Southwest Africans. Of course, the professor embedded in nonsensical race-science admits his inability to publish the work at risk of his own reputation. However, Hoffman appears to continue his somewhat noble work to disprove the foundational ideology in the camp despite him. Unfortunately, this is entirely abandoned at Shark Island where he finds Kezia.

Implicit in the moment of Hoffman's abandonment of *Deutsch-Südwestafrika* is his immediate realization of the harm he had done in the context of genocide. Kezia stripping skulls with a shaven head and tears endlessly streaming down her face seems to knock a reality into the doctor, which, despite repeated traumas, had not set in. There is almost a sense of justice for the viewer, that finally the ignorant German understands his repeated failings. Unfortunately, this is all undone in the final scene of the film. Fast forwarding to 1920, an older Hoffman is lecturing in place of Dr. von Waldstätten, sporting the same sunken dark eyes of his last day in Namibia. His students reveal that Hoffman's earlier lectures featuring Kezia on the falseness of African inferiority were published (by whom and how we do not know). He responds that this work was wrong, and borne of ignorance, proceeding to rip out the pages of his thesis from the book. A moment of reluctant hesitation is quickly met with purposeful gloom as he does so, followed by almost teary eyes of remorse. The audience is left in complete disorientation at the conflicting final scene and its preceding illustration of genocide.

Before the credits roll, commentary overlays the screen: "The Genocide in Southwest Africa of the Ovaherero, Nama, Damara, and San lasted from 1904-1908, its effects are still felt by the affected communities today. Pseudoscientific racial theories

laid the foundation for national socialist policies of the Holocaust.” Thus, the pipeline from turn of the century ethnography to Nazi ideology and the Holocaust—although always implicit—is made explicit. The novel representation of this genocide, ostensibly existing within its own historical context, is fully seated in the Holocaust past, despite the historical events occurring decades before the Nazis dreamed of power. Simultaneously, we are caught between disgust and understanding of Dr. Hoffman. His final moment on screen gives a last silent insight to his true character. Once again, the Good German accepts his doom while pushing all blame to larger mechanisms of evil just as Paul did in accepting the final order of Friedrichs, charging to his death; and as Rath will when he flees from, or dies in, Nazi Germany.

Conclusion: The False Binary of the Good German

There is but one character in these three media who dares to ask what is right, or question all that is wrong in their situation. Instead, we see characters whose self-interest is aligned on a largely binary, hindsight notion of good and evil. It is only Matthias Erzberger, a true-to-life character, who makes a heroic and selfless stand for what is right beyond personal or national goals. While several heroes of the German past have been celebrated in film, particularly those of the Holocaust past such as Sophie Scholl, Anne Frank, or Fritz Bauer, German films are overwhelmingly preoccupied with constructed narratives. Certainly these Good German narratives appear on the surface to challenge notions of heroism, innocence, and perpetration. Yet it is precisely the blurring of the lines, particularly in favor of 'Good,' 'ordinary,' Germans, which serves traumatic cultural memory without serving the demands of ethical representation. Despite the moral qualms and discussions to be raised about the Good Germans, they still decidedly separate from the evil ones: Friedrichs, Wendt, von Crensky, and countless other villains.

The performed (and thus manipulated) failures of the Good German provide a marketable and praiseworthy side-step from the failed performances of German history. It is not difficult to accept the staged roles of the soldier ordered to an unrighteous death, the police officer in service to an increasingly fascist state, or the academic who caves to his institution's immoral expectations. Much more controversial to display is the failures of real people, with whom a collective identity or culture is shared. To know many real, ordinary, even good, Germans failed along ethical lines at magnitudes that perpetuated

genocide and imperial war in the recent past is difficult to bear. However, Germany has long stood as the testing ground for this management of guilt.

The crimes of the last century and a half in Germany are certainly not exclusive to any Reich. Yet the previously described decades work of managing German guilt has given precedent to the nation's function as an open court of opinion. While other nations have undertaken efforts politically, academically, and socially to wrestle with their own past, none does so on the international level of Germany, often seen as a model (dubiously or not) for confronting the past.¹³⁸ Consequently, the increasing financial reliance of the German film industry on American and Western European viewership has only fueled the desire for exculpatory yet condemnable tales of the imperial past. Beyond simple whataboutism and endless comparison in the West with the Nazi past as the ultimate evil, there is economic and political necessity to maintaining and even expanding the Good German trope.

Following decades of Germany as the public domain of wrestling with the dark past, tides began to turn: "Since the 1980s, foreign critics, international agencies, and internal whistleblowers have held other countries with blemished records to similar standards [as Germany] and urged them to acknowledge and come to terms with their past[...]."¹³⁹ The same accountability measures used in mastering the Nazi past are now being framed around other international issues. Specifically reparations, repatriation, and various performative acts of condolence made by Germany, particularly toward Israel,

¹³⁸ A recent popular manifestation of this being Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 2019.

¹³⁹ Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 297.

were called for in communist Eastern Europe. Rather than oblige their political enemies, Germany's efforts domestically and in Israel were ramped up to cloud the demands of the east. These efforts were conscious "defensive maneuvering of the West German Government [which] depended on Cold War politics and U.S. approval, but it succeeded even after the collapse of communism[...]."¹⁴⁰ Within this context, the cultural phenomenon of German philosemitism and apologia in film and TV served the social and political zeitgeist. Today, as the West wishes to maintain the same goal of "skillfully [dodging] compensation demands in the international arena,"¹⁴¹ media like *Im Westen nichts Neues*, *Babylon Berlin*, and *Der vermessene Mensch* are part of a different context. Now, as the international community is concerned with imperial warfare and rising European fascism, and genocide in the global south, the newly represented German past can again be utilized to complicate, even distract, modern debates of modern problems.

What should be realized is that the Good German and its function(s) in cultural memory are no longer distinctly German, nor is it distinct to the Nazi or even genocidal past. The implementation of the Good German trope further into history opens opportunities for any number of nations to begin the same process of exhuming and forgiving their own past. As market shares, network deals, and award ceremonies continue to prove the viability of the Good German, the trend will almost certainly continue. Fortunately, some signs point to increased movement away from this problematic narrative cliché: German criticisms like that of Sönke Neitzel against *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (2022) or the Schwarze Filmschaffende on *Der Vermessene Mensch*

¹⁴⁰ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 298.

¹⁴¹ Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory*, 298.

have not gone unheard nor unnoticed. Particularly, *Der Vermessene Mensch*'s failure thus far to break into non-German language markets suggests struggles in finding distribution. This is perhaps symptomatic of international concerns for larger backlash from an already innately controversial film. Conversely, the immediate pickup of *Babylon Berlin* following SkyTV's dropping of the series, and *IWNN*'s sweep of international awards in major markets, suggests there is much yet to be gained from Good German, and maybe Good American, Good British, or Good Russian narratives.

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