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# The Cultural Memory Of German Victimhood In Post-1990 Popular German Literature And Television

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**THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF GERMAN VICTIMHOOD IN POST-1990 POPULAR  
GERMAN LITERATURE AND TELEVISION**

by

**ANJA PAULINE EBERT**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2010

MAJOR: MODERN LANGUAGES

Approved by:

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Advisor

Date

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation ...

to Axel for his support, patience and understanding;

to my parents for their help in financial straits;

to Tanja and Vera for listening;

to my Omalin, Hilla Ebert, whom I love deeply.

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## Introduction

My dissertation explores how the collective memory of Germans as victims of World War II and the Third Reich is currently being constructed in and through popular literature, television and mainstream cinema. The MLA bibliography lists over 1,200 articles, monographs and edited volumes on the subject of collective or cultural memory and over 10,000 entries on memory. My dissertation contributes to this expanding and intrinsically interdisciplinary discourse of cultural memory studies by arguing (with Kansteiner 2006) that the dominant research focus be changed from canonical literature to both popular media and their reception as these constitute the primary indicators of cultural memory. My dissertation furthermore contributes to the interdisciplinary research on the Third Reich and the Holocaust by analyzing their representation in German cultural memory, particularly in the memory of post-1990 united Germany.

Canonical Holocaust discourse has recently been challenged by claims that many (non-Jewish) Germans<sup>1</sup> also constitute victims of the Third Reich and the Second World War. This highly charged and complex debate about Germans as victims, which takes place not only within academia but also in the public sphere, includes a discussion of whether Germans can be ascribed the subject position of victim. Contemporary German memory discourse primarily focuses on the experience of German suffering as a consequence of the war and the Third Reich. It reflects a wider trend in Western culture in that the subject position of victim is increasingly claimed as the core determinant of group (Lockhurst 2003; Alexander 2004). To recast Germans, who have until recently been exclusively conceptualized as the *Täternation*, as victim is highly

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the term “German victims” refers to non-Jewish German victims. I am aware of the problematic dichotomy between “German victims” and “Jewish victims.” After all, many Jewish victims were Germans, too.

problematic since the discursive position of victim is already occupied by those people who were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis.

The discourse as to whether ordinary Germans constitute victims of the Second World War and the Third Reich originated immediately after the end of the war and was highly popular in Adenauer's West Germany of the 1950s. Between the 1960s of the student revolution and the *Wende*, the claim to collective German victimhood existed predominantly in right wing movements, such as the *Vertriebenenverbände*, and in the personal narratives in families (Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall 2003). In other words, before 1990, the discourse claiming Germans to be victims constituted vernacular memory – expressed in the form of communicative memory in small groups like families or non-dominant organizations – and functioned as a form of conservative-reactionary counter-memory, challenging the official collective memory. After the *Wende*, the *Opferdebatte* increasingly moved into the realm of official memory particularly because of Helmut Kohl's efforts to establish a whitewashed German past as a source for the national identity of the newly unified Germany. The victim debate was (re-)ignited in 1997 when W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* discussed Germans as victims of Allied bombings and shortly thereafter the debate expanded to also include German POWs in Soviet captivity, German *Wehrmacht* soldiers on the Eastern front, the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia, and German women as victims of rape by occupation soldiers.

Before 1990, there were hardly any publications about German wartime suffering, but since then, the subject has been center stage in a flood of memory artifacts, such as high and popular literature, movies and television programs. The dissertation explores the central aspect of post-unification cultural memory, namely the transition from the collective subject position of a *Täternation* to the claim of collective German victim status. I will analyze this collective identity

transition via both the analysis of dominant cultural artifacts as well as their audience reception. The analysis focuses on popular culture artifacts as memory media which reflects the argument of prominent German historian Wulf Kansteiner (2006) who advocates that cultural memory studies should describe with more precision how such memory emerges in the process of media consumption.

Such large-scale imagined communities (Anderson 1991) as nations construct shared discourses about their past via cultural artifacts. However, it is not so-called high culture but rather popular media, such as television, commercial cinema and popular literature, which exercise the greatest influence on how the national past is remembered. I follow Kansteiner (2006) in arguing that in order to explore German cultural memory, we analyze not only popular media but also their reception. He stresses that in the analysis of cultural memory, the focus on the discourses of elite groups, such as historical scholarship, political culture and canonical literature should be replaced by an analysis of the contribution mass media make to cultural memory construction. The majority of highbrow artifacts do not reach the general public; Kansteiner estimates 25% at most as an audience. Only interpretations of the past that become part of the mainstream national media coverage and are thus consumed by a wide audience have a chance to influence historical consciousness. The artifacts reaching the widest audience are popular culture media. My analysis is therefore primarily based on popular literature, television and commercial cinema.<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter contextualizes the dissertation in the increasingly expansive discourse of cultural memory. I will discuss the collective memory concept and the distinction of collective

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<sup>2</sup> Although my dissertation explores popular culture media, it does not call into question the importance of canonical literature, literary scholarship of the canon/s or historical scholarship. I do, however, argue that when we seek to understand how imagined communities remember their pasts, we need to focus on popular culture media and, furthermore, not limit the analysis to the media characteristics but extend it to their colloquial reception.

into communicative and cultural memory (Assmann 1995). While communicative memory describes the construction of a shared discourse about the past through social interaction within small groups like families (Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Welzer 2002), cultural memory, on the other hand, is embodied in and disseminated through cultural artifacts, like literature, film, TV, monuments, and memorials, and in large-scale imagined communities like nations. My analysis emphasizes cultural rather than either individual or communicative memory since I explore how societies remember their past. After fine-tuning the methodological tools for this project, I will trace the discursive history of how the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and particularly the claim to collective German victimhood have been represented in the cultural memory of both West Germany and post-unification Germany in the second chapter.

The core of the dissertation (chapters three, four and five) explores the cultural memory of Germans as victims embodied in and disseminated through post-unification popular cultural artifacts. Since German unification, when there no longer were two German states, who could each blame the other as the heir of National Socialism, the collective German past had to be renegotiated. And the claim that many Germans too were Nazi victims took center stage in post-unification discourse. The new discourse has been embraced as official German memory in vast numbers of widely consumed cultural artifacts, including canonical literature but particularly in popular literature, commercial cinema and a wealth of semi-documentary and documentary television programs.

Chapter three examines how German women are depicted in the popular literary text *Eine Frau in Berlin*, which is the diary of an anonymous woman who was raped by soldiers of the Russian Army occupying Berlin in 1945. Originally published in 1959 in West Germany and subsequently translated into English, it caused a heated debate among American and German

historians about the role of women in the Third Reich but did not reach a wide audience and quickly went out of print. However, when it was re-released in 2003, the text became a bestseller in Germany. My analysis focuses on how the anonymous author represents herself as a victim in the diary and how the official and vernacular reception of the memoir reflects and in turn reinforces the current notion of collective German victimhood in the public sphere. As the text was recently adapted into a movie which premiered in November 2008, I extend the analysis to both the film itself and its reception.

In chapter four I argue that not only ordinary Germans but even a perpetrator has been represented primarily as a victim. Bernhard Schlink's bestselling novel *Der Vorleser* (1995) – which reached millions of German readers and became a bestseller in the United States too after it was featured on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* – exculpates a former concentration camp guard on the dubious grounds that her illiteracy made her morally illiterate, i.e., unable to distinguish right and wrong (Swales 2003). The analysis of the novel and its reception will be extended to the American film adaptation, which was released in German theaters in February 2009.

Chapter five analyzes how Germans are depicted as victims in one core example of the newly created and widely popular genre of the so-called TV-Event-Movie. After defining and conceptualizing the new genre and its implications, I will analyze the two-part mini series *Dresden*, which was broadcast in 2006 on the ZDF channel. It constitutes Germany's first TV feature film about the Allied fire bombing of the city of Dresden. The series focuses almost exclusively on the figure of the 'good German' and turns bystanders into victims. Concomitantly, *Dresden* conceals German crimes as the fate of the six million Jews and of other Nazi victims and hence, obliterates the question of German guilt.

Chapters three, four and five also analyze the depiction of Jewish victims of the Holocaust – or, in most cases, the lack thereof – in these popular culture artifacts. After all, conceptualizing Germans as victims necessitates displacing Nazi victims from their discursive position as the victim position is claimed by Germans. The analysis of how the collective subject position of ordinary, i.e., non-persecuted, Germans is re-conceptualized from bystanders and perpetrators to victims in popular culture artifacts and their reception is supplemented by exploring the subject in teaching materials that are designed to discuss these particular texts, television series, and movies in German classes of the *Gymnasium* and *Realschule*. The classroom is an important place for students to learn about World War II and the Third Reich, and teaching materials are essential tools for shaping the collective memory of young Germans. In Chapter four, I will also evaluate student-generated websites in order to find out not only how teachers are instructed to discuss *Der Vorleser* in the classroom but also the reception of the novel among students.

In order to understand how these popular embodiments of the post-unification cultural memory have influenced how Germans remember this part of their national history, their reception has to be explored (Kansteiner 2006). It is very difficult to determine the precise effect of these media events on the consumer because as instances of collective conscience they cannot be grasped and analyzed directly. Nevertheless, reception processes and the effect of mass-mediated representations of the past on individuals cannot be excluded from collective memory studies (Kansteiner 2006). Therefore, chapters three, four and five analyze how audiences interpret the films, TV programs and texts since not only the media themselves but the rituals of consumption they underwrite constitute the most important shared component of people's historical consciousness. Each chapter, therefore, not only analyzes how Germans are

transformed into victims in the artifacts themselves but also and especially how these artifacts have been consumed by audiences. The reception analysis will answer the question of how the German public engages with the discursive transformation of Germans into victims. In other words, do they consider the diary, the novel, the TV-Event movie and historical feature film historically accurate and authentic depictions of their collective past (Fluck 2003)? As part of the reception analysis, I examine newspaper and online reviews which represent the official mode of reception. In addition, I discuss how viewers and readers interpret these popular artifacts. There is a variety of sources to consult in order to explore the audience's reception: *Leserbriefe* sent to the authors, and in the case of TV programs and films, to the directors or studios; viewer opinions and statistics, compiled as reports of phone calls to the TV stations about particular programs; *Leserbriefe* published in newspapers; and entries in Internet discussion forums.

However, analyzing the reception of these popular artifacts poses methodological problems. When I was exploring how the literary, filmic and cinematic representations had been received by audiences, I encountered some major drawbacks, neither newspapers nor publishing houses nor TV stations nor film studios archive letters nor calls from readers and viewers. Newspapers do not keep *Leserbriefe*; only those few letters that have been published once in an issue are – like regular articles – available online for a fee. TV stations usually summarize the calls and letters from viewers in a short report. While these summaries give a broad idea of how a TV production was received by the audience, they do not cite actual quotes and note only the gist of the most important comments. Publishers usually send all *Leserbriefe* to the authors. However, in the case of *Eine Frau in Berlin*, the author is not only anonymous but has also passed away. Hence, I contacted the custodian of the manuscript, Hannelore Marek, who told me that such *Leserbriefe* do not exist: neither for the 1959 nor for the 2003 publication. In order to

look at letters that readers had written in response to *Der Vorleser*, I visited the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach*. The *Literaturarchiv* manages Bernhard Schlink's correspondence concerning the novel. However, I was only granted access to the letters after Bernhard Schlink granted me this permission. Furthermore, I was not allowed to take any notes or to make copies of the *Leserbrieife* unless I also had written authorization from those who had written the letters due to copyright issues. It not only took a long time to receive the responses but also many letter writers had moved or even died; after all, *Der Vorleser* had been published in 1995, and the letters had been written between ten and fifteen years ago. After I was able to provide the institute with some consent forms, they copied and sent me the material for a fee. After I had finished writing the chapter, I had to send all quotes from those letters that I had used for my analysis to Bernhard Schlink in order to get his final authorization. However, in the end, he refused to give me his consent because the reader responses I had cited did not reflect his own interpretation, and I was not able to use any *Leserbrieife* about *Der Vorleser* in this dissertation.

I extend this reflection on methodological problems in the respective chapters in order to indicate the practical difficulties of exploring the audience reception of popular culture artifacts. Instead of using letters sent to the authors, TV stations, newspapers or production companies, I had to focus almost solely on Internet resources, which turned out to be a rather abundant source for viewer and reader reviews. I analyze discussion forums on movie websites and on TV channel websites, and the customer review sections on websites that sell books and DVDs. Another useful source for viewer and reader opinions is the on-line comment section following film reviews or newspaper articles. The Internet is such an easy and anonymous tool that it prompts users to share their opinions openly and honestly. The advantage of using the Internet for exploring audience reception is that users have the option to react to earlier comments, which



can result in discussions. However, since Internet users have usernames that obscure their real identity, it is sometimes impossible to determine if the user is female or male or to find out to which generation he/she belongs. In the end, the Internet turned out to be a helpful tool in exploring how these artifacts have been consumed by audiences. However, since it constitutes a relatively recent medium, there are no reader comments on Schlink's novel available from the mid-1990s. Despite these methodological difficulties, it is significant to analyze how audiences interpret and perceive popular literary texts and filmic representations and what role popular media play in shaping the collective memory of their consumers. The reception analysis provides access to the actualization of the memory artifacts' potential and highlights how select audiences consume mass media and how this in turn affects their view of the collective German past.

## 1. Theories of Collective Memory

This chapter contextualizes my argument in collective memory studies which constitutes the theoretical background for the dissertation. I provide a critical genealogy of the collective memory concept, following Jan Assmann's (1995) distinction into communicative and cultural memory. Since I explore how societies remember their past, I emphasize cultural rather than either individual or communicative memory.

### *Memory Studies*

Academic memory studies began in the 1990s. In German memory studies, the analysis of the Holocaust and the Third Reich has been an integral part of this academic discourse; both the use of collective memory in the Third Reich and the Holocaust have been extensively analyzed. Memory studies were part of the so-called cultural turn in academic historiography and literary studies, i.e., the re-conceptualization of the humanities into cultural studies (Kansteiner 2006). Memory studies are necessarily interdisciplinary, bringing together scholars from history, archaeology, cultural studies, literary studies, art history, religious studies, media studies, education, psychology, and sociology (Erl 1). Astrid Erl (2005) describes collective memory as an all-encompassing cultural, interdisciplinary, and international phenomenon (1). She also refers to the social relevance of memory studies and claims that the subject of collective memory is also omnipresent in the public sphere (2). For example, the discussion about the *Mahnmal der ermordeten Juden Europas* necessitated a dialogue among politics, science, art and the public (Erl 2). Nicolas Pethes and Jens Ruchatz (2001) point out that the interaction of culture and memory not only allows but even requires dialogue since no single discipline is able to work on that discourse on its own. It needs the interaction among academic fields which led to the

interdisciplinary dialogue among the social sciences, the humanities and, to a lesser extent, even the natural sciences. Memory studies also make academic research relevant outside the walls of the Ivory Tower when they contribute to the public discussion about how to commemorate the distant and recent past.<sup>3</sup> In Germany, academics contributed most importantly to exploring the collective German memory since 1945 and to coming to terms with the war and the Holocaust.

Aleida Assmann (2002) agrees with Erll: memory studies have the advantage of connecting different phenomena which have been perceived as disparate, until now (40). She states that the collective memory concept enabled scholars to establish correlations and similarities among different fields. She writes: “Das Entscheidende ist hier [...] die Erkenntnis, dass jene verschiedenen Bereiche in ihrer Heterogenität etwas Gemeinsames verbindet, das erst mit Hilfe des Gedächtnisbegriffs entdeckt und thematisiert werden kann. Mit diesem Begriff können Analogien thematisiert und Zusammenhänge erforscht werden, die vorher nicht spruch- und denkreif waren” (40). Assmann, who contrasts memory and history as *warmes Gedächtnis* and *kalte Geschichte* (41), respectively, notes that we need memory to bring the past to life. Memory is seen here as the conservation of particularly traumatic historical events to determine cultural identity and the social formation of groups. History, on the other hand, is characterized by facts and rationality.

However, the omnipresence of memory studies due to its currently trendy status in the humanities also has negative effects: for example, the discipline is rather diverse and often methodologically vague. One of memory studies’ major flaws is that some scholars still do not distinguish collective memory from individual memory, and hence collective memory is still misleadingly conceptualized by applying analogies from individual minds and psychoanalytical

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<sup>3</sup> See Astrid Erll (2005), who writes that memory is an important issue in literature and art and a widely discussed topic in newspapers, as well as a hot topic in politics.

and psychological methods (Kansteiner 16). Many, if not most, literary scholars use the individual mind and psychoanalyses to understand collective memory. While both individual and collective memory preserve the past, nevertheless these are two very different paradigms. It is essential for memory studies to distinguish individual and collective memory as both function in very different ways. In collective memory studies, research should focus on social, political and cultural factors and not on metaphorical uses of psychological or psychoanalytical concepts, such as when the concept of trauma is analogously extended to the collective level to explore the effects of catastrophes on communities. According to dominant trauma theory,<sup>4</sup> when an individual is traumatized, s/he represses the traumatizing event partially or even entirely which results in psychological stress symptoms. It is common belief that a traumatized person can be treated by ‘working through’ the problems, i.e., putting the traumatizing events into words within psychological treatment. However, it does not make sense to treat a nation the same way as an individual. We can neither put a whole nation on the couch, nor does a nation even need therapy since nations can repress past events without psychological consequences. When we speak of social forgetting, it is best to strictly focus on social, political and cultural factors and not on metaphorical uses of psychological models. The concepts of trauma and repression do not capture the factors that contribute to the making and unmaking of collective memory (Kansteiner 18). While individual memory construction is characterized both by conscious/intentional and non-conscious/non-intentional processes, collective memory construction by any social group occurs only consciously and intentionally (Kansteiner 18-19).

Kansteiner identifies another flaw: memory studies need to focus more on identifying sources that allow us to describe how collective memory emerges in the process of media

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on trauma theory Daniel L. Schacter (1996), Judith Herman (1992), Ruth Leys (2000), Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996), and Dominick LaCapra (1998).

consumption (11). He is critical of the fact that research on collective memory does not pay attention to the problem of reception. Kansteiner states that this problem can be addressed, however, by adopting methods of media studies and emphasizes that we should not only analyze the memory artifacts – such as literature, film, television, and memorials – but analyze them as media, i.e. how individuals use them and how the reception influences their views of the collective past (12).

### *Individual Memory*

Individual memories constitute the source of individual identity by differentiating individuals from others.<sup>5</sup> Memories are often falsely assumed to be exact replicas of the past. Our brain is considered a storage case and memories are the stored material, like a drawer that we can open at any time to take out our memories like old photographs. However, autobiographical memories are not as reliable as we commonly think. The brain is no storage closet where memories are placed and taken out when needed. Memories do not correspond to snapshots or videorecordings of reality, and they are neither value-free nor uninterpreted. Furthermore, human memory retains the gist of the events far more accurately than the details. Memories are not veridical copies of a past event but reconstructions which are influenced not only by the stored memory trace but also by the recall conditions. There is no particular location in the brain where these memory traces or engrams are located.<sup>6</sup> Rather, memories are stored in many diverse parts of the brain, hence distributed throughout the mind. Memories are activations of previously activated patterns of neural networks. They are neither snapshots nor films which

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss individual memory only very briefly here because my dissertation focuses on collective memory. I provide a brief summary in order to underline the importance of differentiating between individual and collective memory. For further information on individual memory: Daniel L Schacter (1996), Anne Rothe (2002), and Harald Welzer (2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel L. Schacter (1996), who states that memories are not literal recordings of reality.

can be replayed or looked at again (Rothe, *Constructing Memory* 102). They are not literal copies of the event or even of the rememberer's subjective experience of an event. Memories are only approximations of the subjective experience. During recall, memory is constructed from influences operating in the present as well as from information we have stored about the past. Every recall changes the original memory trace or engram, i.e., new memories are influenced by old memories (Welzer, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis* 45). Social factors are a common source for memory error. Strong social pressure can produce false memories, i.e., lead to the recall of events that never occurred.<sup>7</sup> Self-perceptions exercise a strong influence on memory and thus constitute a potential source for memory error. It is possible that we both recall events that never happened and that we are unable to recall events that did happen. In addition, our mind is very poor at remembering sources, frequently exhibiting a phenomenon cognitive psychologists refer to as source amnesia. We often remember a fact but do not know how we came to know it and therefore how reliable the source was.

### *Communicative Memory and Cultural Memory*

Long-term consolidation of memories occurs in part because people think and talk about past experience. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992), who was the first to explore social factors in the construction of individual memories for which he introduced the term collective memory<sup>8</sup>, states in *The Collective Memory* that remembering is not only an individual,

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<sup>7</sup> See the 'lost in the mall study' by Elisabeth Loftus. Her study shows that children or teenagers could be induced to remember the experience of being lost in a mall even though it did not happen. As time passed, the memories were embellished and became more vivid. The study is summarized in Schacter (1996, 109-110). Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1995) shows that it is even possible to remember one's entire childhood falsely. In *Fragments*, Wilkomirski recalled his terrible experiences as an orphan adrift in the Nazi death camps. Subsequently, it was discovered that the Holocaust 'memoir' was entirely fictional. However, it is not clear if Wilkomirski fabricated his story intentionally or unintentionally.

<sup>8</sup> Because of its focus on social interaction, some scholars prefer the term 'social memory' to 'collective memory'. See for example Peter Burke (1989), or James Fentress and Chris Wickham (1992).

psychological process but is also socially and culturally mediated.<sup>9</sup> The term ‘collective’ is not a metaphorical expression; collective memories originate from shared communications about the past. They are linked with the life worlds of individuals who participate in the social life of a group. Every individual is always part of multiple mnemonic communities, and collective memories exist on very different levels, like families, professions, political generations, ethnic groups, religious groups, social classes, and nations. Halbwachs argues that all individual memory is constructed in social interaction among group members and thus emphasizes the role of everyday communication and the interaction of individual and group memory. He proposed that groups share frameworks of reference and that group identities structure memory. Halbwachs stressed that one can only produce memories when one communicates; therefore both individual and group memory is constructed in and through everyday conversation among group members.

Halbwachs’ concept of collective memory, which mainly focuses on the memory construction within small groups, such as families, was later re-named communicative memory by Jan Assmann (1995).<sup>10</sup> Communicative memory functions in social frameworks; memories of every individual are linked to and thus influenced by the memories of other group members. The construction of communicative memory always occurs within social interaction, especially in direct, oral communication. It does not extend more than three generations. Forgetting occurs because of the dissolution of the group. To the individual, communicative memory seems unchanging and stable, but since it is created by oral communication in face-to-face interaction, it is in fact unstable and changes constantly. In order to stabilize their memories, groups create

<sup>9</sup> See also Bartlett (1997), and Vygotskii (1986).

<sup>10</sup> I discuss Halbwachs’ ideas and Assmann’s concept of communicative memory only very briefly because my dissertation focuses on collective memories of large communities. For further information, see Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Jan Assman (1995).

artifacts (e.g., photos) referred to as *lieux de memoire* by French historian Pierre Nora. According to Nora, groups create *lieux de memoire* in order to strengthen memory and to stop forgetting, when the group-specific *milieux de memoire* is on the verge of disappearing.<sup>11</sup>

While memory artifacts<sup>12</sup> contribute to the construction of communicative memory in small groups, they are far more important for preserving the collective memory of large groups, so-called imagined communities (Anderson 1991), which Jan Assmann terms cultural memory. While communicative memory describes the construction of a shared discourse about the past through direct, face-to-face verbal communication and social interaction within small groups (Halbwachs 1980, 1992, Welzer 2002), cultural memory, on the other hand, is embodied in and disseminated through cultural artifacts, like literature, film, TV, monuments, memorials, in large-scale imagined communities like nations and religious denominations. Cultural memory refers to how people in such large-scale communities with a shared history and cultural identification create a cultural identity and historical consciousness. Assmann emphasizes the role of materiality, i.e., the role of memory artifacts play in collective memory construction. It is embodied in objectified culture, such as texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments, designed to recall the imagined community's past. These artifacts constitute the officially sanctioned heritage of a society and are intended for long-term use. Assmann differentiates between potential and actual memory. Potential memories are embodied in representations of the past stored in archives, libraries and museums. These artifacts that have not yet been utilized in the construction of cultural memory, i.e., their potential has not (yet) been actualized. On the other hand, the term actual memory designates artifacts whose potential has been actualized by audiences in the construction of cultural memories, such as a widely read memoir, a popular

<sup>11</sup> See Pierre Nora (1997) for a detailed concept of memory artifacts.

<sup>12</sup> The term 'memory artifact' was created by Anne Rothe (2002). The term largely corresponds to Pierre Nora's (1997) *lieux de memoire*.



film, or a much visited memorial. Assmann stresses that despite their concern with the past, collective memories have a strong bias toward the present.

Wulf Kansteiner (2006) states that memories are most collective when they transcend the time and space of their original occurrence. In this case, “they take on a powerful life of their own, ‘unencumbered’ by actual individual memory and they become the basis of all collective remembering as disembodied, omnipresent low-intensity memory” (20).<sup>13</sup> Concern with low-intensity cultural memory shifts the focus from the politics of memory – often involving scandals and intrigues over how to represent the past – e.g., in the so-called Bitburg affair – to ritualized representations of the past. Most groups settle temporarily without disagreement on such cultural memories and reproduce them again and again without change. Cultural memories are often constructed around events designated as turning points in history, and imbued a significance that is imposed retroactively. Such turning points are often assumed as having a symbolic significance, as markers of change, and hence they are more likely to transform into political myths. Cultural memory is passed onto and created anew by each new generation through continuous social practice. It is generated by memories of events that were personally experienced only by a small but powerful minority, thus constituting for the majority of group members secondary memories, i.e., second-hand experiences via memory artifacts (Rothe, “Collective Memory” 5). For example, today most Germans did not experience World War II firsthand and thus only have secondary memories of the Holocaust and the Third Reich based not only on stories by family members who did experience the events firsthand but also, and even

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<sup>13</sup> Kansteiner mentions the following example, the cultural memory of the Holocaust in the U.S. Millions of people share a limited range of stories and images about the Holocaust, although only few of them have any personal link to the actual events. For many, the stories and images do not constitute particularly intense experiences, but they nevertheless constitute part of the American cultural memory and identity.

primarily, based on the reception of cultural artifacts, such as movies, documentaries, public debates and speeches, and commemorative ceremonies.

### *Postmemory*

Marianne Hirsch introduced a related concept in *Family Frames* (1997) and in subsequent articles (e.g., 2001, 2008), which she termed ‘postmemory,’ to refer to a kind of second-generation cultural memory of the Holocaust. Holocaust survivors overtly or covertly communicate their experiences to their children who then create very powerful secondary memories of these events. Postmemory explains “the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (“Surviving Images” 9). Postmemory therefore is “defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after. [...] Postmemory would thus be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences – and thus also the memories – of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story” (“Surviving Images” 10). Though Hirsch originally created the term to describe the experience of children of Holocaust survivors, she states that it can also be extended to “other second generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” (*Family Frames* 22). Hirsch’s work focuses on photography, and more specifically, family photographs. For her, photographs are the trigger by which traumatic memory is transmitted across generations because “in their enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life [photographs] are precisely the medium connecting first and second generation

remembrance [...] They affirm the past's existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance" (*Family Frames* 23).

Hirsch's postmemory concept, however, ignores important trends in memory studies research. *Family Frames* (1997) and "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photography and the Work of Postmemory" (2001)<sup>14</sup> mention neither Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory nor Jan Assmann's seminal distinction of collective memory into communicative memory and cultural memory. Unaware of Assmann's important distinction of these two categories, she conflates them. The stories created in families of Holocaust survivors between parents and children constitute communicative memory rather than cultural memory. As a category, postmemory seems to obscure rather than enhance the significant conceptual distinctions developed in memory studies research. While it may be beneficial to have a distinct term to describe the memories of adults whose parents experienced persecution and genocide, such concept would constitute a subcategory of communicative memory, but cannot simply be metaphorically expanded to conceptualizing the cultural memory of large-scale communities.

### *Memory Artifacts*

Cultural memory is embodied in and disseminated through artifacts. Commemorative discourse<sup>15</sup> tends to be determined by the master commemorative discourse of the official sphere of cultural memory which is created by the power elite of a community, who impose it on the community from above and try to suppress alternative commemorative discourses. The master commemorative discourses tend to be normalizing, nationalistic, patriotic and represent the past

<sup>14</sup> Only in her latest article "The Generation of Postmemory" (2008) she briefly discusses Jan Assmann's distinction of collective memory in cultural and communicative memory and Aleida Assmann's notion of family memory, which corresponds to Jan Assmann's communicative remembrance.

<sup>15</sup> Yael Zerubavel (1995) coined the term commemorative narrative. Anne Rothe (2005) proposed that it could be called more generally a commemorative discourse.

in general and idealistic terms and thus are always in danger of manipulating the historical record. The master commemorative discourse is often determined by a small set of political myths and finds expression in dominant artifacts, such as large-scale, costly, 'solid' monuments and large-scale official, ritualized commemorative ceremonies (Connerton 1989). They are spectacles and celebrations of triumph and imposed on the community from above either directly by the government or by organizations entitled to do so.<sup>16</sup> Through participation in commemorative events, group members learn which aspects of the communal past are valued and in what form they should be remembered. The master commemorative narrative continuously reminds communities of their distinct identity. When commemorative events are perceived as static, and difficult to change, they have become part of largely ritualized tradition, a tendency which is particularly strong in authoritarian societies. Although cultural memory appears to change little, it is constantly challenged by counter-memory, which questions the dogmatic and timeless nature of official expressions and at times replaces official memory and its objectification in artifacts. It opposes the master commemorative narrative and stands in hostile and subversive relation to official memory (Zerubavel 1995). The master commemorative narrative represents the political elite's construction of the past, which serves its special interests and promotes its political agenda. Counter-memory challenges this hegemony. It is usually created by small groups and therefore takes initially the form of communicative memory. Counter-memory expresses an alternative commemorative discourse which tends to originate in the vernacular sphere of cultural memory and is embodied in dominated artifacts. Dominated

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<sup>16</sup> According to Nora (1992), "dominant sites are spectacles, celebrations of triumph. They are imposing as well as generally imposed from above by the government or some official organization, and are typically cold and solemn, like official ceremonies. One doesn't visit such places, one is summoned to them" (18-19).

artifacts<sup>17</sup> are much smaller in scale, more flexible and involve only a small number of people in their creation and maintenance.

Memory media – like literature, TV, film, photography and art, the names of streets, schools and cities, monuments, memorial sites, buildings, and commemorative rituals – enable groups to construct and transmit the past. They appear in three basic forms: 1) verbal (books, newspapers) 2) spatial-imaginistic (monuments, museums, libraries, pictures, stamps, names of streets, schools, universities, airports and even cities) and 3) performative (ceremonies, rituals, commemorative days) (Rothe, “Collective Memory” 8). Since communicative memory is predominately created and embodied in oral communication whereas cultural memory is objectified in artifacts, the latter is far more stable. Artifacts are a necessity in large communities to create collective memory because all communication occurs indirectly through the media. Cultural memory can therefore only be analyzed through memory artifacts. They emerge in a process of conflict and negotiation between the official and the vernacular sphere.<sup>18</sup> And while memory artifacts are physically stable, sometimes the meaning they were intended to signify changes over time and even disappears. In order for the artifacts to stay meaningful, each new generation has to reinterpret them, i.e., re-translate them into a shared memory narrative according to its present needs.<sup>19</sup> It is only through this reinterpretation process, the constant attribution of new meaning, that memory artifacts stay alive and meaningful within a society’s collective memory (Rothe, “Collective Memory” 13). As contemporary cultural memory is characterized by a vast amount of memory artifacts produced by mass media, popular culture thus has much more influence on cultural memory construction than highbrow culture

<sup>17</sup> Nora (1992) refers to dominated sites as “places of refuge, sanctuaries of instinctive devotion and hushed pilgrimages, where the living heart of memory still beats” (18-19).

<sup>18</sup> John Bodnar (1994) differentiates between the official and the vernacular sphere.

<sup>19</sup> See Pierre Nora (1997), who stresses the memory artifact’s ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new connections.

(Kansteiner 2006). Since the majority of 'highbrow' artifacts do not reach the general public as an audience, they only function as memory media for an educated minority – Kansteiner estimates 25% of the population at most – rather than the majority (320). In contrast, popular culture reaches the vast majority and hence has a greater influence on collective memory construction.

Historiography has even less influence on collective memory (Kansteiner 2006). Although it contributes to cultural memory construction by serving the important function of rectifying errors, historiography nevertheless has to compete with popular media, especially film, TV, art, popular and even high literature for the attention of audiences in the construction of cultural memory.<sup>20</sup> Pierre Nora (1997) similarly argues that historical events themselves and their scholarly representation in historiography are less important for cultural memory construction than how the events are represented in widely consumed media. Historiography, however, does not stand in sharp opposition to cultural memory. It also constitutes an expression of cultural memory because cultural memory provides the framework within which historiography exists, and both paradigms are governed by similar processes of intentional and unintentional selection, interpretation and distortion which are socially conditioned (Kansteiner 2006).

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<sup>20</sup> See the research by the study of a group of social psychologists at the *Kulturwissenschaftlichen Institut* in Essen. The research examines how stories of National Socialism and the Holocaust are passed from one generation to another, in this case through conversations that take place among family members of three generations. The study proposes a process of *Wechselrahmung*, where the suffering of Germans during the Second World War is constructed by using elements borrowed from documents that actually depict the Holocaust. (e.g., transports on cattle cars, the brutality of soldiers, piles of corpses, etc.) Furthermore, contemporary witnesses use fragments from movies or books and incorporate them into their own life stories. The first post-war generation mixes, for example, movie scenes with autobiographical descriptions and at the same time second and third generation uses images from books and TV to fill in gaps in the stories they have been told by their grandparents. This shows that the third generation – and to a lesser extent the second generation – form their collective memories predominantly based on mass media consumption, rather than instances of highbrow cultural memory, such as formal education, or even the communicative memory of family lore. The study is published in Harald Welzer, Sabine Moeller, and Karoline Tschuggnall (2003).

*Wulf Kansteiner's Critique of Memory Studies*

Kansteiner (2006) articulates several misconceptions and problems in memory studies in *The Pursuit of German Memory*.<sup>21</sup> He concludes that there is insufficient distinction between collective and individual memory and claims that the conceptualization of collective memory exclusively in terms of the psychological and emotional dynamics of individual remembering is a grave error. A second misconception is the assumption that memory artifacts directly reflect both the intentions of the memory makers and are consumed by audiences exactly as intended. Cultural memory studies have focused on the analysis of the artifacts themselves and thus neglected examining both the production and the reception process. However, neither the memory makers' intentions nor the physical characteristics of the artifacts are reliable indicators as to how audiences interpret the artifacts. It is misleading to assume that audiences constitute homogeneous entities in which all members interpret an event in the same way (let alone in the same way as critics and scholars) and thus form a cohesive interpretive community. The larger a medium's actual and potential audience, i.e., the more collective a cultural memory is, the less likely it is that its reception will be unanimous because audiences employ the same media in different ways and for differing reasons.

Problems result furthermore from an overextension of the analogies between individual and collective memories and in particular from confusing collected and collective memory (Kansteiner 17). Collected memory<sup>22</sup> is a composite of individual memories with respect to significant events of the group (e.g., individual memories of Holocaust survivors). They are thus individual memories but not of events significant only to the individual (e.g. meeting one's spouse) but of events important to group identity (e.g., the Holocaust or the *Wende*). Since

<sup>21</sup> For further information on problems and misconceptions in memory studies, see Kansteiner (2006, 11-27). I mention only the two problems relevant for my argument.

<sup>22</sup> For further information on collected versus collective memory, see Jeffrey Olick (1999).

collected memories are stored in individual minds like all individual memories, they can be studied with the methods of individual psychology. Collective memories, on the other hand, are constructed in large-scale communities through creation and continuous re-interpreting of memory artifacts, and hence function very differently from individual memories.

In order to rectify these misconceptions, Kansteiner suggests that collective memory studies sever itself methodologically from individual memory studies and focus on the analysis of memory artifacts, their production and reception. He thereby proposes that memory studies should orient themselves methodologically on communication and media studies and should describe with more precision how cultural memory emerges in the process of media consumption. He proposes that memory studies need to focus on the analysis of popular media, their production and their reception and emphasizes that it is essential to explore the communication processes between memory makers and memory users via memory artifacts. He furthermore stresses that a focus on elite groups and their discourses, such as historical scholarship, high culture and mainstream museums, should be replaced by an analysis of the contribution mass media make to collective memory construction.

Kansteiner illustrates the importance of analyzing the reception of popular media based on the complex stratification of the audiences who consume mass media representations. He developed a model depicting this stratification as a memory pyramid. First, there is a vertical divide between conservative and liberal collective memories, which splits the pyramid into antagonistic but dialectically related halves. Second, there is a division along generational lines between the cultural memory of three to four generations. For example, the research by Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall (2003) in *Opa war kein Nazi* demonstrated that the third generation tends to heroize their grandparents and to whitewash their past, even in families in which



grandparents talk openly about their involvement in Nazi crimes. Furthermore, there are three horizontal categories, which reflect the differences in cultural memories of socio-economic and professional group affiliations. Kansteiner notes that the very small top layer of the pyramid is constituted by the intellectual elite, such as scholars and highbrow journalists. While they may seek to inform the general public, they predominantly communicate among themselves and at best reach parts of the second tier of the pyramid, which is constituted by 15% to 25% of the population and constitute the politically and culturally interested public who take an active interest in the cultural products of the elite. The largest group of over 75% of the population constitutes the general public about whose media consumption habits and cultural memory we know comparatively little. However, what is known is that the general public derives its collective memory almost exclusively from the mass media, such as mainstream TV programs, and yellow-press publications like the *Bild Zeitung*. Kansteiner points out that the larger public is virtually oblivious to highbrow cultural memory discourses. For example, the Historians' Debate, which was and still is an important milestone for German intellectuals, was never followed by the larger public. While intellectuals have difficulty imagining how few of their fellow citizens care about highbrow discourses, the general public has no interest in and is unaware of the serious memory debates that take place in the realm at the top of the pyramid. Cultural memory is furthermore divided into private and public discourses. Private memories are concerned with emotional rather than factual consistency and are often in contradiction with official memory. For example, political turning points, like the end of the war in 1945, are not always perceived as turning points in individuals' life stories (Kansteiner 320-321).

The interaction among the cultural memories of the three socio-economic sections of the population, which are based on the media they consume, is complex. The different memory

media, such as professional historiography, memory politics, TV programs, popular and highbrow literature and films about the past, generate their own distinct discourses, and they only partially complement and influence each other. The majority of highbrow memory artifacts not only do not reflect the collective memory of the vast majority of the general public but the artifacts also never even reach the general public as an audience, i.e., they simply do not function as memory artifacts for the vast majority of people. Only interpretations of the past that become part of the mainstream national print media, television programs or popular literature have a chance to influence historical consciousness and collective memory.

### *Cultural Memory as Theoretical Framework*

My dissertation reinforces Kansteiner's idea that it is not so-called highbrow culture but rather popular media, such as television, commercial cinema and popular literature, which exercise the greatest influence on how the national past is remembered. I explore how experiences of Germans at the end and in the aftermath of World War II are depicted as victim experiences in post-*Wende* literary and filmic representations in order to analyze the current German *Opferdebatte* in its embodiment in popular literature, television and commercial cinema.<sup>23</sup>

Literature and film occupy a special position as memory artifacts because unlike any other memory artifact, such as monuments or photographs, they constitute simultaneously a memory artifact and a memory narrative (Rothe, "Collective Memory" 5). They thus constitute instances of communicative memory because they convey a fictional memory narrative to an audience. At the same time, as memory artifacts, they are instances of cultural memory because

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<sup>23</sup> I am disagreeing here with Astrid Erl (2005), who considers canonical literature as the core embodiment of cultural memory reflecting a more traditional approach of literary rather than cultural and media studies. She largely effaces the role of popular literature.

they are constructed by memory makers with the intention of fixing an event in collective memory. Because of their connection to communicative memory, literature and, to a lesser extent, film are well suited to embody vernacular memory and to potentially function as counter-memory (Rothe, "Collective Memory" 7). The advantage of literature as a memory artifact over both feature and documentary film lies in significantly lower cost for production and distribution. And compared to historiography, literature plays a more important role in shaping a nation's collective memory because it can be both an incentive for critical reflection, like historiography, and it has, like film, the ability to evoke emotional engagement, empathy, and identification (Rothe, "Collective Memory" 15).<sup>24</sup>

Television and commercial cinema<sup>25</sup> are nevertheless the most effective and least acknowledged artifacts for shaping historical consciousness (Kaes 112). Cinema and TV are the primary sources on which most people base their sense of the past and thus supercede not only historiography and highbrow but also popular literature in their mass appeal because, as Winfried Fluck (2003) argues, "film achieves the impression of an unmediated directness of representation" (213). However, as feature films, both those made for TV and those (initially) made for cinema audiences, often take liberties with historical facts for the sake of inventive storytelling (Kaes 113-114), viewers may come to mistake this fictionalized history as factually veridical. Popular media largely seek to remain invisible as media to ensure the largest audience wanting to be entertained rather than educated and thus wanting to suspend disbelief and critical reflection. Therefore commercial cinema and TV movies hide their own constructedness, which makes the viewer believe that film action indexically mimics what really happened. In other

<sup>24</sup> In authoritarian societies, however, literature is also a means of inscribing official memory since literature is censored and controlled by the government.

<sup>25</sup> For more on film as a memory artifact see Winfried Fluck (2003) and Anton Kaes (1990).

words, audiences tend to forget that they are watching a constructed reality and take the filmic representations as real and authentic, even if fictional.

This dissertation furthermore reflects and reinforces Kansteiner's notion that memory research should describe with more precision how collective memory emerges in the process of media consumption. After all, cultural artifacts only embody a potential which needs to be actualized in the reception process if the artifacts are to function as memory media (Rothe, "Collective Memory" 5). In the following chapters, therefore, I discuss the artifacts themselves and also analyze them as media, i.e., explore how their reception influences the audience's conception of the collective past. My analysis of the collective memory of Germans as victims of the Third Reich and World War II therefore examines core cultural artifacts as forms of representation and spheres of negotiation over the subject position of Germans as victims.

## 2. Locating the *Opferdebatte*: The Intellectual History of German Collective Memory

This chapter outlines the collective memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic and post-unification Germany with a focus on the question of whether and to what extent Germans also constituted victims. The subject of German victimhood did not only emerge after the *Wende* but constitutes a development of some sixty years of German *Vergangeheitsbewältigung* (Kölsch 2003). As the debates since the immediate post-war period provide the prerequisites for the current discussion, it is necessary to analyze these representations of German victimization in order to understand today's *Opferdebatte*. This chapter therefore explores how the question of German victimhood entered the public sphere and how representations of this aspect of the Nazi past changed over time.

### *The War Generation and the Postwar Silence*

The early postwar period<sup>26</sup> was characterized by the memory of German victimhood. After the war, Germans were absorbed in their own postwar misery, brought on by destroyed cities, many millions of refugees, lack of food, and the overall chaotic conditions. While funneling all their energy into surviving, on economic reconstruction, and the crimes perpetrated in the Third Reich, let alone their own role in it, the Germans' sense of shame or guilt were absent. The German self-image of the war was reduced to soldiers' experiences, stories of bombings, expulsion, occupation, and rape, creating a collective memory of German victimhood, rather than of perpetration. The Nuremberg trials reflected and reinforced this self-image by sentencing only the most prominent members of the political, military, and economic leadership

<sup>26</sup> There are numerous ways of dividing the postwar years from the *Kriegsende* until today in order to differentiate among different phases. Wulf Kansteiner (2006) introduces five different periods. Ruth Wittlinger (2006), however, argues that the most typical way is to distinguish three phases.

of Nazi Germany, and hence implicitly exculpated all perpetrators of lower ranks and particularly followers and bystanders. Germans were reassured that they themselves were victims. During the first decade after the war, Germans largely did not acknowledge their responsibility for Nazi crimes; rather they talked about their own status as victims. However, their self-image of 'victim' was not only prevalent in communicative memory of small memory communities, such as the family; cultural memory was likewise promoting this concept. Comparisons between German and Jewish suffering were by no means the exclusive preserve of the political right, and critical voices about Germans as victims were a distinct minority. Between 1945 and 1960, there was a conservative tendency to repudiate Nazism and to demonize Hitler and Nazi leaders, who were seen as the only ones responsible for the crimes. There was a clear distinction between a small group of Nazi elite who were responsible for Germany's woes and the majority of good Germans who had been betrayed. Eighteen million Germans considered themselves as *kriegsgeschädigt*; among these were some fourteen million expelled German citizens. Although the flight and expulsion of ethnic Germans from the territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers was characterized by chaos, death and loss, it was a consequence of the aggressive and expansionist Nazi politics which were supported or at least tolerated by the vast majority of Germans, a fact that was erased from Germany's collective memory after the war. The loss of their home generated a collective identity of victims among the expellees and refugees. The annual meetings of the *Landsmannschaften*, the regional organizations of expellees, became occasions to mourn the lost *Heimat* in the German East, and special monuments were constructed in memory of those who died during the flight. In 1950, the expellees, together with some former Nazis, founded their own political organization, the *Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten* (BHE). Their most important message was that the

government must never give up its claims to former German territories in Central and Eastern Europe and must never accept the Oder-Neisse line as Poland's western border.

Germans were collectively responsible for the Third Reich, its crimes and the war. German wartime suffering pales in comparison to the suffering inflicted by Nazi perpetrators and in the name of all Germans on others. However, in the post-war period, most Germans considered their own suffering on a par and were thus generating a moral balance. Politicians of the new Federal German Republic (FRG) brushed aside feelings of guilt or shame, and enacted new legislative initiatives that provided monthly subsidies and financial support for victims of allied bombing and expulsion. In 1948, the Burden Equalizing Law (*Bundesversorgungsgesetz*) was established and a few years later the Law to Aid Victims of War (*Lastenausgleichsgesetz*), which signified that German suffering was so immense that it even needed compensation.

Politicians of the FRG were less than enthusiastic about punishing Nazi perpetrators and compensating victims of Nazi crimes. They did not want to alienate the former Nazis among their voters and strove to put their meager resources into rebuilding the country. In 1949, Konrad Adenauer, the first *Bundeskanzler* after the war, left little doubt that Germany must acknowledge what Germans had suffered during the war. Although the German state acknowledged that Jews and others had endured extraordinary losses in the Third Reich, Adenauer's highest priority was the new state of the Federal Republic of Germany. Economic recovery was an important point on his agenda and Adenauer promised to help those Germans who had suffered losses due to the war, particularly families of fallen soldiers, expellees and the 1.5 to 2 million prisoners of war.

Theodor Heuss, the first president of the FRG and a more self-critical politician than Adenauer, focused his energy on generating a new German identity and helped design an infrastructure of cultural memory that determined the West German public sphere for many

years. In speeches, he addressed three important themes: the relationship between Germans and Jews, the suffering of the German people as a result of Nazi rule, and the legacy of the conservative resistance against Hitler. Heuss made his most important contribution to Germany's collective memory in 1949 in his speech before the Wiesbaden Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation. While he argued that one must never forget the crimes committed against Jews in the Third Reich, he rejected the notion of collective German guilt. He argued that the assumption of collective guilt represented the same type of simplification that the Nazis had used when they collectively demonized all Jews. He proposed the term "collective shame," which he considered a more adequate designation for the burden of being German in the postwar era. As he put it, "the worst that Hitler has done to us ... is that he forced us into the shameful condition of having to share the name 'German' with him and his henchmen" (qtd. in Kansteiner 207).<sup>27</sup>

Officially, the West German state acknowledged that Jews and others had suffered extraordinary losses. An important milestone was the establishment of the Federal Law for the Compensation of the Victims of National Socialist Persecution (*Bundesentschädigungsgesetz*) in 1953. However, the past was remembered selectively and the acknowledgment of German crimes against humanity was complemented by claims that German victims had endured no less than what the Nazis had inflicted on others. The collective German self-definition as victims was enabled by the projection of all responsibility for the crimes onto the Nazi leadership and the casting of Nazism as a natural rather than a man-made catastrophe.

Collective German victimhood and the clear distinction between the evil Nazis and the good Germans was reflected in and reinforced by literature and film in the immediate aftermath of the war. *Trümmerliteratur*, which was often written by war veterans like Heinrich Böll and

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<sup>27</sup> Kansteiner (2006) points out that Heuss reveals here and (in later speeches) how carefully conservatives tried to orient citizens in the right moral direction without alienating their voters.



Wolfgang Borchert, and *Trümmerfilme* like Wolfgang Staudte's *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (1946) depicted the suffering of the German population during and after the war and identified the criminals of the Nazi regime in order to exonerate the masses. During the 1950s, rubble films gave way to so-called *Heimatfilme* like Hans Wolff's *Am Brunnen vor dem Tore* (1952). The sentimental movies simulated a perfect and harmonious world. They depicted an intact and idyllic *Heimat*, a peaceful place Germans did not have anymore and liked to dream of. Another dominant filmic genre of the 1950s was the German war movie, which includes Paul May's *08/15* (1954), Alfred Weidenmann's *Der Stern von Afrika* (1957), and Bernhard Wicki's *Die Brücke* (1959). Few Germans questioned at that time that most soldiers had done anything but their duty. Most veterans and their families openly rejected the claim that *Wehrmacht* soldiers had committed war crimes and favored a version of the past in which soldiers were not killers but victims. The war movies supported this highly selective representation of the past and distinguished neatly between evil Nazis and good Germans. The literary counterpart of the *Kriegsroman* is characterized by similar historical revisionism with the goal to represent German soldiers as heroes and victims. The most famous example for this genre is Heinz G. Konsalik's *Der Arzt von Stalingrad* (1956) which became an international bestseller and was adapted into a movie in 1958. The novel focused on the suffering and agony of German soldiers in a Russian POW camp, narrating a version of the past in which German soldiers were courageous and caring men with high moral principles rather than perpetrators.

#### *The Second Generation: The Postwar Era Is Over*

In the 1960s, West German discourse on the Third Reich was dominated by the Auschwitz and Eichmann (and other Nazi) trials. The dramatic courtroom testimonies of Holocaust victims left no room for repression, and the question about how to come to terms with

the Nazi past topped the political agenda. The West German state began to collect evidence systematically that could be used in prosecuting German citizens who had carried out crimes in the Third Reich. One of the key questions was who was to be considered a Nazi. The new concept included people who were involved in the Final Solution, had practiced other acts of overt anti-Semitism and the so-called *Schreibtischtäter*. Still, the bystanders and followers were not included in this definition. Although perpetrators were increasingly prosecuted, strategies of denial persisted and the victim claim remained present.

In 1963, Konrad Adenauer resigned from chancellorship, which marked the end of the postwar years with its emphasis on economic reconstruction and West Germany's integration into the Western powers. Political culture became more democratic and liberal and the end of the postwar years opened a space in which a more critical examination of National Socialism was possible. The silence of the 1950s gave way to public commemorations and historical research, in which the Holocaust emerged as the defining moment of Germany's history. The *Verjährungsdebatte*, which marks an important step in Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, further sensitized Germany to the Holocaust. Throughout the 1960s, the judicial decision about the statute of limitations for murders committed in the Third Reich was a very important subject of public discussion. In 1965, parliament voted to extend the statute of limitations for four years. In 1969, they extended it by another decade. In 1979, after new discussions and debates, it was finally decided to abolish the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes.

Adenauer's successors Ludwig Erhard and Kurt Georg Kiesinger were reluctant to break with the politics of their famous predecessor. They dutifully administered the various compensation and reconciliation provisions but saw no need for new initiatives. This era ended in the early 1970s, which marked an important phase of transition in the official politics of

memory of the republic. The new chancellor Willy Brandt, a Social Democrat and a resistance fighter in National Socialism, advocated a more open discussion and acknowledgment of responsibility for crimes. He called for an adequate confrontation with the past, not only by those who had experienced the Third Reich but also by those who were born after the war as he stressed that no one is free from this history. On the one hand, the Brandt administration still practiced the memory politics of the Adenauer era. On the other hand, people like Brandt and Gustav Heinemann were the first federal government officials to sponsor exhibits and museums about the Nazi era. They tried to shape the collective memory of the post-war generation, who had not experienced the Third Reich, by stressing the importance of teaching recent German history. Brandt's most important contribution to the politics of memory was his famous *Kniefall* in 1970 at the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Despite the criticism the act received in West German public discourse, internationally it was the only successful commemorative act by a German politician at that time. Brandt's emotional, spontaneous gesture ignored the rhetoric of sobriety he and all other German politicians had used in most of their statements about the Holocaust. Brandt's spontaneous gesture changed existing rituals of memory and marked the beginning of a new era of Holocaust memory politics.

During Brandt's years in office, the student movement enraged the political elite. The extreme leftist rebellion against the political mainstream, most cogently embodied in the Baader-Meinhof Group, were headed by German students of the 1960s, the first generation not implicated in the crimes of the Nazi regime. They were questioning their parents' generation's alleged clean state with respect to Nazi crimes. Their reinterpretation of Nazism was an influential factor in the reorientation of West Germany's historical culture in the 1960s. As a

result, the political awareness that all Germans bore responsibility for the Nazi crimes came to the fore.

In 1974, Helmut Schmidt subsequently took over the chancellorship. Although likewise a Social Democrat, Schmidt had been a *Wehrmacht* officer and was rather holding on to old political traditions. Nevertheless, he was the first chancellor to visit Israel and to speak at the memorial ceremony for the victims of *Kristallnacht*. He initiated the government's involvement in Holocaust remembrance ceremonies which would become even more important under Helmut Kohl's chancellorship. The public dominance of the perpetrator theme is also apparent in literary representations. In 1963, Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* was the first media event that focused on the responsibility of the bystander. Peter Weiss' play *Ermittlung* (1965) and Rolf Hochhuth's play *Soldaten* (1967) were inspired by the testimonies of the Auschwitz and Eichmann trials, focusing on German responsibility for the Holocaust. Although the dominant discussion of this period was about the responsibility and guilt for German crimes, a more conservative counter-memory existed which continued to keep the "Germans as victims" theme alive. This period is thus characterized by the remembrance of Nazi victims as well as German victims.

The 1970s and 1980s generated a new literary genre, the autobiographical *Vaterliteratur*, which functioned as the voice of the second generation, the children of perpetrators, followers and bystanders, who attempted to come to terms with their parents' refusal to acknowledge their guilt and responsibility. These narratives represent confrontations particularly with their fathers, whom they not only accuse of falsely portraying themselves as victims but of being perpetrators. German film of this period strongly emphasized Germany as the perpetrator nation which failed to break with its past. New German Cinema, popular from the 1960s to 1980s, was rooted in the

leftist uprisings of the 1960s and one of the most artistically productive periods in post-war German film-making. It marked the shift from the notion of Germans as victims to Germans as perpetrators. Directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, Alexander Kluge, Margarethe von Trotta and Helma Sanders-Brahms no longer considered Nazi crimes and collective German responsibility a taboo. Nevertheless, German victimhood remained in public discourse. According to Paul Cooke (“The Continually Suffering Nation”), Fassbinder’s *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979) portrays the fate of a young woman who struggles to survive in postwar Germany. Helma Sanders-Brahms’ *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (1979) displays a feminist use of the victim theme and solely blames German men for National Socialism. In Margarethe von Trotta’s *Die bleierne Zeit* (1981), the two female protagonists, members of the postwar generation, are represented as victims of the past. Their generation is paying the price for its parents’ crimes, being forced to come to terms with a crime for which they are not responsible.

In the Federal Republic, the broadcasting of television programs was resumed in December 1952. Two years later, the ARD started broadcasting and the ZDF went on air in 1964. These two TV stations held the monopoly until 1983, when commercial TV was introduced. West German TV widely disseminated the notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and significantly shaped the collective memory of the Holocaust in Germany. According to Kansteiner (2006), from 1963 to 1993, the ZDF produced over 1,200 documentaries on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.<sup>28</sup> But the programs avoided raising some of the most difficult questions about German guilt and postwar responsibilities. Kansteiner notes that the ZDF contributed to the task of coming to terms with the past with three types of television programs. First, there were philo-semitic documentaries that were designed to counteract postwar anti-

<sup>28</sup> However, when commercial TV was introduced, the ZDF pushed these documentary programs to less popular time-slots.

Semitism and depicted centuries of Jewish-German culture but included only brief references to the Holocaust. Second, imported feature films emerged that addressed the legacy of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe via a focus on the fate of individuals. These programs reinforced the notion that Germany had likewise been an occupied nation. Third, programs were made about the rescue of Jewish victims by Germans in order to provide positive role models and reinforce the figure of the 'good German.' Only few ZDF programs discussed the issue of Germans as perpetrators; this silence was even surpassed by the silence about the role of the bystander. Kansteiner distinguishes two phases of engagement with Nazism in West German television, 1963 to 1971 and 1978 to 1986. In the first phase, programs were made and consumed by the first generation that had experienced the Third Reich and the Second World War firsthand. These programs critiqued Nazism but, reflecting and reinforcing viewer preferences, avoided self-critical representations of the Holocaust and the notion of collective German guilt, and tried to strengthen the faith in the new German state and lift the burden of the war and postwar years.

After 1977, Jews were primarily depicted as Holocaust survivors. Approximately sixty percent of all ZDF programs that dealt with the Third Reich employed the survivors' perspective. In 1979, the American TV series *Holocaust* drew millions of viewers. The representatives of the West German political sphere were surprised by the sympathetic popular response to the American series, and this response significantly contributed in the same year to the abolishment of the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes.

*The Third Generation: The Kohl Era*

By the 1980s, the majority of Germans no longer had personal memories of the Nazi past which marked a new era in West Germany's collective memory of the Third Reich. The notion of the Holocaust's uniqueness was widely accepted and Germany was increasingly cast as a collective perpetrator nation. Germans were, if not collectively guilty, at least collectively accountable for the National Socialist past. The investigation of Nazi crimes intensified and led to the public acknowledgment of more victim groups,--particularly homosexuals, Sinti and Roma, Jehovah's Witnesses and so-called 'asocials,' --and to historical analysis of why these victims had been denied victim status earlier. Comparisons of German victims and victims of Germans did not vanish from public discourse, but it was widely agreed that the Holocaust was unique and that Germans were collectively responsible for the horrors of the Third Reich, regardless of their own suffering. This self-critical perspective, which in the 1950s was only held by a minority, was by now widely accepted by politicians, historians, intellectuals, and journalists. The emphasis on the Holocaust displaced the discussion of German victims to the discursive margins. The new approach to the German past was reflected in the politics of public commemoration, foreign relations with Germany's East European neighbors and Israel, history education, and television programs, particularly in the wake of the 1979 broadcast of *Holocaust*. Never before have German politicians paid so much attention to the representation of the past, and it was in the 1980s that politicians began to employ the Holocaust as a political tool.

By the 1980s, the memory of the Nazi past had become a core constituent of West German politics and culture which had resulted in a critical and distrustful stance among many Germans towards national history as it was overshadowed by the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities. It seemed impossible to draw on German history as a source of national identity and

even pride. However, Helmut Kohl, who was elected chancellor in October 1982 and seventeen years younger than Brandt, argued in a speech he gave in Israel in 1984 that because of “the grace of late birth and the fortune of a special family” he “could not be guilty” of Nazi crimes (qtd. in Kansteiner 189). Furthermore, he exculpated not only the postwar generations but also the followers because he claimed that they had no other choice than to follow National Socialist ideology. He even argued that the Third Reich constituted space where opposition was impossible and thus reinterpreted the immoral into an amoral time-space to exculpate all Germans from guilt and responsibility. Kohl’s memory politics enacted a more conservative approach of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as politicians and intellectuals began to speak publicly of national pride.

Kohl acknowledged the Holocaust but pursued a memory politics of normalization and historization with the goal of putting Germany morally on the same level as other Western countries. On May 5, 1985, as part of a diplomatic visit to the FRG to mark the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, the American president Ronald Reagan and Helmut Kohl held a commemorative ceremony at the military cemetery in Bitburg, which contained the graves of *Wehrmacht* and even *Waffen-SS* soldiers. The visit gave rise to the so-called Bitburg Affair and what Kansteiner (2006) dubbed the West German memory wars which culminated in the *Historikerstreit* and ended with the Jenninger debacle. Defending his highly controversial decision, Reagan announced that there was nothing wrong with visiting the cemetery because “those young men are victims of Nazism also, even though they were fighting in the German uniform, drafted into service to carry out the hateful wishes of the Nazis. They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps” (qtd. in Levkov 39). Equating *Wehrmacht* and even *Waffen-SS* soldiers with Holocaust victims is not only historically outrageous but also



unethical and immoral. Honoring German war casualties in the context of a ritual of mourning and reconciliation amounted to a wholesale relativizing of the Nazi crimes as it transformed perpetrators into victims. The fact that the Bitburg visit became the worst PR failure in Reagan's and Kohl's careers indicates that such relativization did not reflect the dominant stance toward the Nazi past among a significant part of the German population.

Richard von Weizsäcker, then president of the FRG, took a contrary position on May 8, 1985, only three days after Kohl's and Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery. The speech which he delivered at the *Bundestag* has become one of the most important contributions to the politics of West German collective memory. Speaking directly about Nazi crimes, Weizsäcker stressed the importance of a self-critical Holocaust remembrance and, while emphasizing that postwar generations shared no political responsibility for the Nazi crimes, acknowledged the legacy of this past. He significantly contributed to the discussion of collective German victimhood by acknowledging the singularity and uniqueness of the Holocaust when he argued that although Germans had suffered during the war, the victims of genocide took precedence. As such, he created what Kansteiner termed a "hierarchy of victimhood" (257).

One year later, revisionist historians attempted to re-position Germans as victims of the Second World War and pointed to the Allies' bombardment of German cities as well as the mass rapes of German women in 1945 as evidence of collective German victimhood. Michael Stürmer favored a revival of national pride and of a positive national identity and denounced the liberal left and its obsession with guilt. Ernst Nolte called for the Nazi period to be treated as an ordinary historical event, so that the Holocaust could be normalized and relativized and seen in the context of other historical atrocities. Although he was not denying the magnitude of the Holocaust, he did question its uniqueness by relativizing it through a comparison with Stalinist

crimes, stressing that it was one of many horrific events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Nolte argued that because a number of high-ranking Soviet politicians were of Jewish origin, the Holocaust was a preemptive defense by Nazi Germany against a hypostasized plan of a Soviet attack on Germany. In Nolte's view, the Holocaust was not only a preemptive strike against a hypostasized Soviet attack but also against a supposed Jewish threat. To justify the latter claim, Nolte cites a letter by Chaim Weizmann, the President of the World Zionist Organization, from 1939, in which he declares that the Jews will fight on the British side in the Second World War. Likewise in 1986, Andreas Hillgruber's controversial book *Zweierlei Untergang* was published. Its two essays discussed the Holocaust and the defeat of the *Wehrmacht* on the Eastern front respectively, thus implicitly equating the two events. In the first essay, the author furthermore equated the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the flight of Jews from Nazi Germany. Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas rejected the neo-conservative historiography of Stürmer, Nolte and Hillgruber, in an article entitled "Eine Art Schadensabwicklung" in the July 11, 1986 issue of *Die Zeit*. Habermas was outraged that the conservative historians were trying to relativize the Nazi crimes in order to sanitize the German past. During the *Historikerstreit* of 1986/7, which extended beyond academic discourse to newspaper and magazine articles, the conservative historians tried to establish positions and attempted to debate what had never been discussed in public before but had only been topics of right-wing discourse.

The German memory wars ended in 1988, when the president of the *Bundestag* Philip Jenninger gave a controversial speech on the occasion of commemorating *Kristallnacht*. His use of Nazi terminology broke linguistic taboos, for example, he referred to "Hitler's obsessive notion of the black-haired, hook-nosed Jew who violates the blond, curly-haired German woman

with his blood” (qtd. in Schlant 199). His rhetoric, particularly the extensive use of indirect speech, made it difficult for his listeners to differentiate between Nazi ideas and his own which generated the idea that Jenninger did not sufficiently distinguish himself from the Nazi ideas he referred to. After much public and political pressure, he had to resign from office, only a day after his controversial speech. The German memory wars of the late 1980s revealed that core ideas that had been established in the postwar years were still prevalent after forty years, albeit with variations. Despite Habermas’ laudatory efforts, it was a time of neo-conservative revival, and conservative politicians were calling for the shedding of Germany’s burden of collective guilt.

Since by the 1980s virtually every German household owned a TV set, a whole nation based their sense of the past largely on TV programs, particularly until the commercial stations became common. Television had, and still has, an immense influence on shaping popular collective memory as it ‘sweetens’ the difficult task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with the pleasures of mass entertainment. As they reached a large audience, TV programs transformed the way millions of viewers thought about the Nazi past to a much greater extent than history education, memory politics or public debates and thus became the most effective artifact for shaping historical consciousness and Germany’s collective memory. While West German television largely avoided direct confrontation with the Nazi past in the 1970s, between 1981 and 1989, the ZDF aired over 260 primetime minutes of Holocaust programs per year (Kansteiner 126). After the exceptional success of the *Holocaust* mini-series in 1979, the ZDF produced many expensive Holocaust movies, including *Die Geschwister Oppermann* (1983), *Regentropfen* (1983) and *Die Bertinis* (1988). It also aired American productions like *Playing for Time* (1980),

*The Winds of War* (1986) and the 1986 French production *Au nom de tous les miens* (*For Those I Loved*).

The programs produced in the 1980s focused on the suffering of Holocaust survivors and provided accurate and detailed historical information about the genocide. The large numbers of audiences of such TV programs indicated not only serious interest but also a critical attitude toward this subject and contradicted the assumptions of politicians and intellectuals, both on the left and on the right, who thought that the German population did not want to be reminded of the Nazi past. However, the ZDF programs did not explore the issue of the perpetrator or bystander, although, or maybe because, for many years bystanders represented the majority of the audience, and thus never confronted the viewers with their collective German responsibility for the crimes. Although the television programs represented Holocaust victims, they depicted the Holocaust as a “crime without perpetrators and bystanders” (Kansteiner 123). As the programs incited German audiences to identify with the Holocaust victims, they ignored the question of collective German responsibility for the crimes. Kansteiner even argued that there was “an uncanny resemblance between the passive viewers who were surprisingly willing to watch the Holocaust unfold on the screen and the actual bystanders who observed pogroms and deportations with similar stoicism” (Kansteiner 123).

#### *From the Wende to the Opferdebatte*

While the notion that ordinary Germans were victims originated immediately after the war and dominated Adenauer’s West Germany of the 1950s, the subject only reentered main stream public discourse and official memory in the 1990s. With unification, long suppressed questions about nation and history were revived which gave rise to a renewed debate of collective German memory. Generating a shared memory of National Socialism became a

significant matter of national politics and identity building after unification. Hence, in the 1990s, the memory of the Nazi past pushed to the fore with strong force and returned to the heart of German cultural memory. This development ignited a series of debates and events that re-shaped the memory landscape and heralded a shift towards a wider acknowledgment of German suffering during World War II (Schmitz, “The Return” 3).

Given the intense television coverage of the subject, in the 1980s German cultural memory of the Third Reich focused on the Holocaust. However, while the programs had brought the Holocaust into German living rooms and incited consumers to empathize with the victims, they had omitted the role of those who had committed and/or tolerated the crimes (Kansteiner 123). Only in the 1990s did discussions about the role of perpetrators, followers and bystanders arise. Television programs, literary and scholarly publications played a major part in igniting public debates. In 1992, Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* gave rise to the first major post-unification debate about the role of soldiers as perpetrators. Browning concluded that Nazi killers were not evil monsters or fanatics but ordinary men, who had not killed because of hatred but because of obedience to authority and peer pressure.

The discussion of ordinary Germans as perpetrators was taken a step further with the publication of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in 1996. Goldhagen argued that Germans not only knew about, but actually supported the killing of the Jews and explained the perpetrators’ willing complicity in the Holocaust by recourse to the German history of anti-Semitism, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which had paved the way for willingly accepting and supporting Hitler’s plans for the Final Solution. The controversial book ignited heated debates not only in academia but also in major newspapers and even on

television. In the wake of the Goldhagen debate, perpetrators became a primary focus of television programs, for instance, in Guido Knopp documentaries *Hitlers Helfer* and *Hitlers Krieger*. However, Kansteiner notes that the TV programs only depicted the Nazi leadership but disregarded the average perpetrator and the bystanders (Kansteiner 124).

The public debates on perpetrators and their motivation culminated in the so-called *Wehrmachtsausstellung*, which was shown throughout Germany between 1995 and 1998 and depicted the involvement of the German army in the Holocaust. The exhibition, whose official title was *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*, showed via written documents and photographs that the German army had been actively involved in murdering Jews, POWs, and civilians, a claim that had previously been taboo. The exhibition undermined the popular myth of the honorable *Wehrmacht* by documenting the horrendous crimes the German army had committed. Browning, Goldhagen and the *Wehrmacht* exhibition and the public debates they ignited exposed the crimes of ordinary Germans which, according to Kansteiner, constitute “the most challenging legacy of the Holocaust” (178) since it confronts Germans with their historical legacy.

In 1998, Martin Walser criticized Germany’s commemorative culture. In his acceptance speech for the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*, Walser criticized that Auschwitz was being used as a *Moralkeule*, a constant reminder to promote a guilt complex among contemporary Germans. He constructed all Germans as the victims of this international anti-German discourse. Furthermore, he was critical of the fact that Holocaust commemoration had become an obligatory ritual in Germany and emphasized the significance of a personal stance vis-à-vis the Holocaust. Walser’s privileging a private form of memory over public commemorations exposes a discrepancy between official and private memory. While official

collective memory highlights German guilt and responsibility for Nazi crimes, most importantly for the Holocaust, personal and communicative memory are dominated by German hardship and suffering. Ignatz Bubis (1998), the head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, accused Walser of “geistige Brandstiftung” in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and severely criticized him for publicly advocating and legitimizing the turning away of public German discourse from Auschwitz and warned against a growing nationalism among German intellectuals (n.pag.).

The public debates over ordinary Germans as perpetrators also engendered the counter claim of collective German victimhood by groups like the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, a non-profit organization representing the interests of Germans who had fled or been expelled from areas which became part of Poland and Czechoslovakia after the Second World War (Kansteiner 306). In 2000, they put forward a proposal for the establishment of a *Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen* in Berlin which generated public controversy because the center might portray Germans as victims without adequately acknowledging that flight, expulsion and resettlement at the end of World War II were consequences of the aggressive and expansionist Nazi politics which were supported or at least tolerated by the vast majority of Germans. Furthermore, the center could also be perceived as competing with the Holocaust Memorial over collective German memory of the Third Reich, especially since the latter is also situated in Berlin. Victims of flight and expulsion were also the subject of Günther Grass’ 2002 controversial novel *Im Krebsgang*, which depicts the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a ship carrying thousands of German refugees, after it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine. Grass argues that the deaths of these civilians served no military purpose and warns of the dangers of repressed memory. He juxtaposes the untold experiences of German refugees with official memory which perpetuates the notion of German guilt. *Im Krebsgang* was received by the German press as “lifting a taboo on public discourse

about German wartime suffering and as legitimizing a present debate” (Schmitz, “The Birth” 94). According to Kansteiner, Grass “either purposefully or inadvertently called into question the predominance of the Holocaust memories and directed attention toward the experiences of their own and their parents’ generations which had been temporarily relegated to a secondary position within the infrastructure of German memory” (306).

Another trigger for the shift in memory discourse to German suffering was the publication of W.G. Sebald’s *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1997) which represents Germans as victims of Allied bombing raids. During the Second World War, 131 German cities and towns were bombed by the Allies (Sebald 11). Six hundred thousand civilians died and seven and a half million Germans were left homeless (Sebald 11). Sebald examines the question of how and to what extent the atrocities suffered by German civilians in the years from 1942 to 1945 have been remembered and asks why the subject occupies so little space in Germany’s cultural memory. The debate over German bombing victims was reinforced in 2002 with the publication of Jörg Friedrich’s *Der Brand*, which narrates the bombing of Dresden and calls it a war crime. He states that the Allies knew what destruction their incendiary bombs would cause and that they intended to kill as many civilians as possible. Friedrich’s book was criticized for calling the allied pilots *Einsatzgruppen* and for referring to the air raid shelters as *Krematorien*. ‘*Einsatzgruppen*’ was the term used for the mobile killing squads on the Eastern front who killed vast numbers of Eastern European civilians, particularly Jews while ‘*Krematorien*’ refers to the crematoria in which the corpses of killed concentration camp prisoners were burned. Friedrich’s use of language implies that he tried to equate Nazi victims, particularly the millions of Jews who were murdered in concentration camps and by the mobile killing squads, and German civilian victims in an attempt to balance the score.



While the taboo of discussing German wartime suffering in the mainstream media had been broken in 1997 with Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, the debate reached the climax in 2002 when both *Im Krebsgang* and *Der Brand* were published. In the same year, social psychologists Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall published *Opa war kein Nazi* which explored the communicative memory of the Third Reich in German families. The generation that experienced the Third Reich and the Second World War as historical witnesses still tends to vastly downplay its own involvement in the Nazi power structure and the Holocaust and to place its own status as victims at center stage. And the third generation not only accepts these lies, half-truths and trivializations but also mystifies and idealizes its grandparents. This influential study thus revealed a significant discrepancy between official memory, which emphasizes collective German guilt, and family memory, which rejects German guilt and stresses German victimhood

The notion of collective German victimhood challenged dominant Holocaust discourse. The highly charged and complex debate, which took place not only within academia but also in the German public sphere, focused on three taboo subjects: the large-scale rape of German women by the Soviet army, the bombing of German cities, and the flight and expulsion of ethnic Germans. Although Germans were present as victims in West German collective memory in the years immediately after the war, this issue had been pushed aside by the postwar generation and from then on became a taboo in mainstream discourse until the late 1990s. The *Opferdebatte* arose over the status of German civilians who suffered and/or died at the end of the Second World War, how they should be adequately commemorated in collective memory particularly with respect to the notion of collective German guilt and responsibility for Nazi crimes. How could Germans simultaneously be cast as followers and bystanders on the one hand and as

victims on the other? Could one legitimately mourn German victims without claiming that this constituted their primary or even their sole subject position? Could one mourn them without negating collective German responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism?

According to Schmitz, the current representation of German suffering constitutes a “form of ‘belated’ or displaced collective empathy” of the third and fourth generations with their grandparents and great grandparents, which also indicates that among these later generations the question of collective German guilt is no longer a central issue (“The Birth” 105-6). This development marks both a total renunciation of the collective memory generated by the immediate postwar generation during the student movement and an attempt to integrate the disparate official-cultural and familial-communicative memory discourses. However, the claim to collective German victim status is highly problematic since the discursive position of ‘victim’ is already occupied by those people who were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis. Conceptualizing Germans as victims seems to advocate displacing Nazi victims from their discursive position and replacing them with German victims, or at least suggests that the discursive position of ‘victim’ could be shared between both groups, and to efface the German positions of perpetrator, follower, and bystander (Rothe, “The Competition”).

#### *German Wartime Suffering in Literature, Film, and Television*

At the turn of the twenty-first century, German literature, film and television reflected and reinforced the re-emergence of German wartime suffering in the public sphere. Texts like Günter Grass’ *Im Krebsgang* (2002), Ulla Lachauer’s *Ostpreußische Lebensläufe* (1998), Peter Glotz’s *Die Vertreibung. Böhmen als Lehrstück* (2003), and Christoph Hein’s *Landnahme* (2004) which depict flight and expulsion, were widely acclaimed in major German newspapers. Likewise, autobiographical and fictional accounts about the bombings of German cities like Gert

Ledig's *Vergeltung* (2001), Volker Hage's edited volume *Hamburg 1943: Literarische Zeugnisse zum Feuersturm* (2003) and Hans Erich Nossak's 1976 *Der Untergang*, which was reissued in 2003, received national recognition. Furthermore, Uwe Timm's highly acclaimed auto/biographical account *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) depicts and critically reflects on the author's childhood memories of his older brother, who was a member of the *Waffen SS* and died at the Eastern front while Willy Peter Resse's memoir *Mir selber seltsam fremd. Die Unmenschlichkeit des Krieges. Russland 1941-1944* (2003) represents his own wartime experiences. Last but certainly not least, the taboo subject of mass rape entered the public sphere. While Anonyma's diary *Eine Frau in Berlin*, which was originally published in 1959 and reissued in 2003, is most famous, Margaret Boveri's 1978 autobiographical book *Tage des Überlebens* was reissued in 2004. Prior to these two examples, rape had also been a subject in Sybille Meyer's and Eva Schulze's *Wie wir das alles geschafft haben. Alleinstehende Frauen berichten über ihr Leben nach 1945* (1991) and Susanne Zur Nieden's *Alltag im Ausnahmezustand. Frauentagebücher im zerstörten Deutschland 1943 bis 1945* (1993).

Commercial cinema likewise reflected the trend of representing Germans as victims of the Second World War and the Third Reich. Most famously, Bernd Eichinger's 2002 *Der Untergang*, which narrates the last twelve days of the Third Reich and is predominantly set in Hitler's bunker in Berlin, creates a clear dichotomy between a minute number of leading Nazis, particularly Hitler who is represented as a demonic madman, and ordinary German followers and bystanders, who are solely depicted as victims in order to exculpate the latter. The movie has not only been seen by over 4.5 million Germans but was also internationally very successful; for example, it won the Academy Award for best foreign film in 2005. In 2008, the film adaptation of Anonyma's 2002 re-released bestselling diary *Eine Frau in Berlin* was shown in cinemas

throughout Germany. And a few months later, in February 2009, the film adaptation of the bestseller *Der Vorleser* was released in German theaters and likewise internationally successful: Kate Winslet received the 2009 “Best Actress” Academy Award for her role in the film.

Television also picked up the subject of German wartime suffering. While the documentary genre claims indexicality of its representations and is consumed in the Rankean sense of depicting the past “wie es eigentlich gewesen” by the vast majority of viewers, they constitute representations and are thus inherently selective and reflect dominant discourses and prevalent power structures. Documentaries about flight and expulsion, the bombing of Dresden, and the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* are the most famous examples that represent Germans as victims. Particularly, Guido Knopp’s dozens of melodramatic documentaries became ubiquitous on German public television. The programs have been dubbed docutainment or histotainment by critics, because Knopp links historical facts with entertainment which makes his documentaries highly popular with viewers. *Die große Flucht*, for example, which depicts the flight and expulsion of some 13 million ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War, had an audience of 15 million viewers. Although Knopp’s documentaries were successful with the audience, historians maintain that Knopp’s work did not reflect historical scholarship. Kansteiner calls the documentaries “an ingenious mixture of historical pornography and historical education” (176) and criticizes Knopp’s *Die große Flucht* as “onesided mourning about German suffering” (174). Schmitz accuses Knopp of using Holocaust imagery in order to depict German suffering which results in enabling “contemporary Germans to equate the fate of their dead predecessors with that of Nazi victims, while forgetting the context in which the latter became victims, namely German perpetration” (“The Birth” 104).

In the wake of Knopp's successful docutainment, German television generated a new genre, termed *TV-Event-Movie* in German pseudo-English. These cost-intensive historical mini-series are widely consumed by German audiences. For instance, the Sat1 two-part drama *Die Luftbrücke* (2005) about a woman who has to survive as a single mother in postwar Berlin and falls in love with an American soldier during the Berlin Airlift had a record-breaking audience of 8.97 million viewers. And the aforementioned two-part mini-series *Dresden* (2006), which constitutes Germany's first TV feature film about the Allied fire bombing of Dresden, broke audience records for the ZDF with over 12 million viewers. *Die Flucht* (ARD, 2007), which depicts the expulsion of ethnic Germans at the end of the war, and *Die Gustloff* (ZDF, 2008), which represents the sinking of the refugee ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* in the final months of the war, likewise had record audiences. The German public television stations ARD and ZDF furthermore broadcast German suffering in another newly created TV genre, the docudrama, which constitutes a mix of documentary and feature film but claims to indexicality of representation and adherence to the autobiographical pact. In 2006, the ZDF aired the three-part series *Die Kinder der Flucht*, another depiction of flight and expulsion. The most recent docudrama *Hungerwinter* (ARD, 2009) extends the realm of German victimhood to the immediate postwar years and focuses on the winter of 1946/47 when the German population struggled to survive freezing temperatures and starvation. The trend of depicting German suffering on television continues into the present. The *TV-Event-Movie Vom Glück nur ein Schatten* (ZDF), which tells the story of a woman and her children who had to flee from their home in Danzig and who try to make a new life in the immediate postwar years, wrapped up filming in December 2009. In early 2010, the ZDF will begin filming a three-part series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* about five friends between 1941 and 1945. The ZDF published the following press release ("*Unsere Mütter,*

*unsere Väter*“): “Uns interessiert das Schicksal der Soldaten an der Front genauso wie das der Frauen, die hinter der Front oder daheim miterleben mussten, wie die brutale Logik des totalen Kriegs alle Regeln menschlicher Zivilität außer Kraft gesetzt hat. Und uns interessiert die Frage, was in diesem Zusammenhang Schuld heißt, kollektive ebenso wie individuelle.”

### 3. Remembering German Women as Rape Victims in Anonyma's *Eine Frau in Berlin*

*Eine Frau in Berlin* is the diary of an anonymous woman .who was raped by soldiers of the Russian Army occupying Berlin in 1945. While originally published in 1959 in West Germany, it did not reach a wide audience at the time and quickly went out of print. However, when it was re-released in 2003, the book became a bestseller in Germany and was recently adapted into a movie which premiered in October 2008. By now, over two million people have seen the film, and it won the award for the best international feature at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. Contextualized in a brief survey of feminist debates on both the role of German women in the Third Reich and of sexual violence against women in wartime, this chapter analyses how the diary and the movie adaptation depict German wartime suffering and how audiences have interpreted the literary and filmic representations of German women as victims of World War II.

#### *Feminist Discourse on Women in the Third Reich*

Since *Eine Frau in Berlin* represents the victimization of German women in the Second World War, it is important to review the intellectual history of feminist research on ordinary German women within the Nazi system. Feminist research focuses particularly on the question of what role women played in National Socialism. This question tends to be inadequately phrased in terms of the dichotomy of whether they were victims or perpetrators. Between the 1970s and the mid-1980s, when feminist research was dominated by the women's movement, feminists largely argued that all women were victims of the Nazi system, because its patriarchal structures oppressed them (Herkommer 12). At that time, women fought for their rights and against sexual oppression and sought to create a collective female identity. Hence, feminist debates about

women's roles in National Socialism emphasized solidarity among all females and attempted to achieve this goal by casting all women as victims of patriarchal oppression.

In the mid 1980s this so called *Opferthese* led to a controversy, the *Historikerinnenstreit*, named in reference to the (male-dominated) *Historikerstreit*, among German feminist historians (Herkommer 12). The *Historikerinnenstreit* discussed the question of whether women should be seen as victims of the Nazi system or as perpetrators who actively and voluntarily took part in the system, including its annihilation apparatus. During the controversy, the traditional feminist idea of women as eternal victims was finally given up, and German women were collectively reconceptualized as perpetrators. Feminists who supported the *Täterinnenthese* regarded not only women who actively participated in the Nazi annihilation as perpetrators but also those who had been followers and bystanders (Herkommer 56). Women played a significant role in the Nazi system, since private and public spheres were not autonomous. The Third Reich encouraged matrimony through marriage loans, dispensed family income supplements for each new child, publicly honored families with many children, bestowed the *Ehrenkreuz der deutschen Mutter* on women with four or more children, and increased punishments for abortion. Girls were taught to embrace the role of mother and obedient wife, both in school and in the *Bund deutscher Mädchen*. Nazi ideology advocated a larger, racially pure population, which would enhance Germany's military strength and provide settlers to colonize conquered territory in Eastern Europe. The Third Reich's aggressive population policy encouraged women to bear as many Aryan children as possible. Although in Nazi ideology women were inferior to men, they were by no means simply 'child-bearing machines' deprived of their rights. Especially during the war, women took over several important duties at the home front. The need for labor prompted the state to both encourage and coerce women into the workforce and even into the military itself.



Contrary to the stereotype of men as active Nazi perpetrators and women as passive followers or bystanders, women were both potential and actual perpetrators in the Third Reich. Although the National Socialist movement had almost no place in its higher echelons for women, there were women in the lower and middle levels in the National Socialist apparatus. This included employment in euthanasia institutes and concentration camps. In the private sphere, too, women were obedient followers and supporters of National Socialism and acted as informers, denounced their fellow citizens, were caring wives of SS-officers, and supported the system by giving birth to many children to increase the Aryan race.

Since the late 1980s, feminist research no longer casts the role of German women in the Third Reich in the simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomy but generated a more differentiated notion of women's roles in National Socialism (Herkommer 61). The discussion of the "ganz normalen Frauen" (Bock 245) came to the fore which considered women's diverse roles as bystanders, followers, and perpetrators in National Socialism. In feminist discourse at large, the notion of women as a homogenous group with the same problems and experiences and their characterization only in terms of gender shifted to analyzing the diverse living conditions and social roles which were determined by further social categories like ethnicity. Instead of classifying women into victim and perpetrator, feminist research analyzed the respective social position and situation of women in which they became victims, perpetrators, or both and emphasized the diversity of positions and situations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For a projection of future feminist research see Christina Herkommer (2005).

### *Rape and War*

The work of Susan Brownmiller and Catherine MacKinnon represents two main traditions of feminist theory concerning rape. McKinnon (1979) states that rape is located on a continuum of male-dominated female sexuality which is characterized by various forms of coercion because of women's socio-economic dependence on men. Brownmiller (1975), on the other hand, argues that rape primarily constitutes an act of violence aimed at signifying dominance and humiliation. Rape is thus not solely an act of physical violence but also an act of signification because it constitutes a gendered expression of oppression. Since it is an act of sexual violence, it traditionally evolves from the difference between male and female. Men are capable of rape while women are not and while men can be raped too, according to Teresa de Lauretis (1987), they are raped as "women in a social sense" (37) and male-male rape degrades the victim by imposing on him the status of the female.

Rape and sexual assault against women are all too common in wartime and regularly employed by soldiers as a weapon in wars in order to humiliate the enemy. For example, German soldiers raped women in World War I when they marched through Belgium and France. American GIs raped in Vietnam as did soldiers during the war in former Yugoslavia. During World War II, *Wehrmacht* soldiers and SS systematically committed rapes in occupied countries; in fact rape constituted a significant part of the Nazi annihilation process.

Although rape in war is likewise enabled by gender difference and constitutes an expression of male dominance, it has further symbolic significance. Rape in wartime ought not solely or even primarily to be regarded as "excesses of singular hordes run wild" (Card 37) but rather as generating a message in the symbolic context of the nation and the gender system. Conquering a woman has the symbolic meaning of conquering a country. The body of the

woman becomes a “ceremonial battlefield” (Brownmiller 31) and sends a message of victory to the defeated side. It constitutes not only a physical and symbolic aggression against individual women but also an assault on an entire community. The rape of women tends to be considered by soldiers as part of the loot they are entitled to and symbolizes a destruction of the defeated males’ property. Rape furthermore impacts the defeated community because rape may lead to pregnancy and hence the genetic information of the victimizer is passed on while that of the defeated men is not. Rape thus also violates women in their role as mothers of a future generation. Moreover, since women tend to hold the family and community together, violating or even killing them constitutes an attack on the stability of a community. Rape furthermore symbolically degrades the conquered men and renders them inferior and impotent because they are not able to fulfill their traditional role of protecting their wives, sisters, or daughters. As such, women become a token of relations between men.

*The Rape of German Women at the End of World War Two*

Vast numbers of women victims were raped by Russian soldiers during the last months of World War II. This sexual violence not only served the aforementioned symbolic purposes but also constituted an outlet for rage and revenge. Many of the Red Army soldiers lost their wives, mothers, or daughters because *Wehrmacht* soldiers or the SS had raped and/or killed the women of their enemies. However, Russian soldiers raped not only German women. They did not differentiate between political, religious, and ethnic backgrounds and thus also raped Polish girls, Jewish and communist women who had been liberated from German concentration camps or came out of hiding to welcome the liberators.

Until recently, the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers constituted a taboo in German discourse. Helke Sander’s 1992 documentary *Befreier und Befreite* was the first

important exploration of this subject and revealed the vast extent of the crime. By analyzing statistics of pregnancies, abortions, and venereal diseases in hospital records, Sander estimates that between March and October 1945 1.9 million women were raped in the former German Reich, some 100,000 of them in Berlin. Thousands of these women were killed after they had been violated, and many others killed themselves out of the shame patriarchal society had instilled in them. In presenting these numbers, Sander broke a taboo and finally gave those a voice who had kept silent for such a long time. However, although the documentary *Befreier und Befreite* succeeded in drawing attention to those German women who had been raped at the end of the Second World War and to rape during wartime generally, the documentary is problematic. It revives the rhetoric of female victimization, which the *Historikerinnenstreit* of the mid 1980s had rejected. Sander generates a biased representation of men and women in her film. She constructs a clichéd opposition between the genders. Soldiers appear as eternal rapists and women as their eternal victims. The German women are presented as if they had existed exclusively in a feminine non-political realm during the Third Reich. As such, they bear not only the burden of rape but also pay for the crimes committed solely by German men. Sander rejects any consideration of what roles women played in the Third Reich. Some critics even suggested that Sander uses the rape of German women in order to balance the score with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust (Koch 32).

However, not all scholars agree that the rape of German women at the end of the war constituted a taboo. Regina Mühlhäuser (2008), for instance, takes issue that every contribution to this topic –she cites *Befreier und Befreite*, *Eine Frau in Berlin*, and the ZDF two-part mini-series *Die Flucht* – claims to finally break the taboo. She argues that the rape of German women by soldiers of the Red Army has been a topic on and off in West Germany since the end of the

war, that it thus constituted common knowledge and that this knowledge was also used in political discussions. In her conference paper “Vergewaltigungen im deutschen Opferdiskurs” (2008), Mühlhäuser argues that it is not the rapes by soldiers of the Red Army that constituted a taboo in Germany, but rather those by the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* at the front, during their fight against partisans, in *Wehrmachtsbordellen*, during transports of prisoners, during occupation, or before executions. She considers it wrong that these crimes are largely neglected in the research literature. Furthermore, Mühlhäuser regards the ubiquitous depiction of Russian soldiers as rapists of German women as ethically problematic not least because it can be employed by right wing revisionists in arguments that the war against the “russischen Untermenschen” was right and justified.

I agree with Mühlhäuser. Although it is important to draw attention to the rape of German women in order to give those victims a voice and to draw attention to rape in war in general, the discourse becomes problematic when German women are solely depicted as rape victims and their complex prior roles and subject positions of perpetrator, follower, and bystander in the Third Reich are disregarded. A widely held belief among many feminists is that especially in wartime, women are solely victims and martyrs, who are brutalized, raped, tortured, killed, and left alone in a world dominated by patriarchal power. An ethically responsible and historically viable discussion of the rape of German women at the end of the Second World War must also provide the specific historical context, i.e., it must be contextualized in the crimes committed by many Germans, both men and women, particularly the Holocaust and the mass killings of millions of Slavic people.

*Anonyma's Diary*

*Eine Frau in Berlin: Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945* is the diary of a woman. She depicts her personal experiences of the Russian occupation of Berlin and provides a vivid and detailed portrait of German life at the end of the war, for instance, the feeling inside a bomb shelter, the breakdown of city life and civil society, the behavior of the occupying forces, and the enforced labor for food. The author is highly educated and may have been a journalist since she mentions that before the war she had traveled through numerous countries, including Russia, where she learned to speak some Russian. Since the rapes of German women, including her own, constitute the core subject of the diary, the author opted to remain anonymous. Although Anonyma depicts herself and the other raped German women as victims of individual Russian soldiers, her diary meets the challenge of honestly representing these experiences without exculpating herself as bystander in the Third Reich, without assigning collective blame, and thus does not take recourse to the notion that the suffering inflicted on Germans balances the score with the suffering Germans inflicted, which would become dominant among conservative historians in the Historians' Debate. *Eine Frau in Berlin* gave the brutalized women a voice to share their horrific experiences and drew attention to the ubiquity of sexual violence in wartime. The author not only represented rape from a female perspective in order to express women's suffering and discrimination but also provided the historical context for these crimes and accepted her share in collective German responsibility for the crimes committed in the name and with the tolerance and even the support of virtually all Germans.

Anonyma seeks to describe what she experienced as analytically and unbiased as possible because she is aware that these experiences have historical significance and that her diary thus constitutes a historical record. She observes, for instance, that "man erlebt Geschichte aus erster

Hand, Dinge von denen später zu singen und zu sagen sein wird. Doch in der Nähe lösen sie sich in Bürden und Ängste auf. Geschichte ist sehr lästig” (26). Even when she is being treated as exclusively a body and thus an object, she sees herself as part of history and a subject and comes to independent judgments about her experiences. Anonyma reports not only about her own difficult and dangerous situation but also the stories of other women’s horrific rapes. She also reflects on the fine line between rape and prostitution, or as she calls it, “Essen anschlafen” (206). However, she not only sets out to engage in a quasi-prostitutional relationship with a high ranking Russian officer to have access to food but also because she accurately assessed the situation that he would protect her from further rapes. Despite her experiences, Anonyma does not hate Russians collectively. Since she speaks some Russian, she is able to see the men not only as brutal rapists but also as individuals. She is aware that German men probably behaved likewise and thus partially contextualizes the rapes of German women, including her own, in the history of World War II.

German men only play a minor role in Anonyma’s account. They are unable to protect the women and surrender them to the Russians in order to protect themselves. However, in the exceptional moral universe of Berlin in the spring 1945, “kein Mann verliert sein Gesicht, weil er eine Frau, sei es die eigene, sei es eine Nachbarsfrau, den Siegern preisgibt. Im Gegenteil, man würde es ihm verdenken, wenn er die Herren durch Widerstand reizte” (144). German men are not only unable to protect ‘their’ women but also to face the consequences of the mass rapes. They did not want to know about these experiences, and husbands who did know even abandoned their wives after they had been raped because to them it constituted their own ultimate humiliation. Anonyma depicts the reaction of her boyfriend as paradigmatic. After he returns from the front, she asks him to read her diary, which she had initially written for him,

because she wanted him to understand what had happened to her. However, he is unable or unwilling to understand and instead blames the raped women, calling them “schamlos” (274) and complaining that “es ist entsetzlich mit euch umzugehen [denn] alle Maßstäbe sind euch abhanden gekommen” (275). Anonyma perceptively interprets the defeat of the Third Reich as indicative of the irreparable decline of the male archetype it venerated.

Throughout the diary, Anonyma considers larger questions of society and morality within the extraordinary circumstances of the war and the Third Reich. As a bystander, she neither opposed Nazism nor was she a faithful party member. Friends advised her to leave Germany before the war, but she decided to stay. Although Anonyma feels tied to her country and wants to share the fate with her people, her national loyalty does not blindside her to the crimes committed in the Third Reich. While she acidly notes how quickly her neighbors went from praising Hitler to mocking him, she asks herself about her own share in the collective responsibility: “War ich selber dafür? Dagegen? Ich war jedenfalls mittendrin und habe die Luft eingeatmet, die uns umgab und die uns färbte, auch wenn wir es nicht wollten” (183). Although she only briefly touches on atrocities against civilians committed by the *Wehrmacht* and the *SS* during the Second World War and on the Holocaust, Anonyma does acknowledge the collective guilt resulting from these crimes, despite her own daily struggle for survival. On June 15, 1945 she writes: “Unser deutsches Unglück hat einen Beigeschmack von Ekel, Krankheit und Wahnsinn, ist mit nichts Historischem vergleichbar. Soeben kam durchs Radio wieder eine KZ-Reportage. Das Gräßlichste bei all dem ist die Ordnung und Sparsamkeit: Millionen Menschen als Dünger, Matratzenfüllung, Schmierseife, Filzmatte [...]” (273).

While Anonyma does not pity herself, refuses pity from others, and acknowledges collective German guilt and responsibility, Kurt W. Marek, the editor of the text and friend of the



author, writes in the epilogue that in 1947 she told him that “keins der Opfer kann das Erlittene gleich einer Dornenkrone tragen. Ich wenigstens hatte das Gefühl, dass mir da etwas geschah, was eine Rechnung ausglich” (283). The statement not only implies the simplistic notion that women largely pay the price for the crimes of men but also the ethically and epistemologically even more questionable idea of balancing the score, which would become dominant during the Historian’s Debate. However, as the statement is not part of the diary itself but reported by the editor in the afterword to the 1959 edition, i.e., some twelve years after it was supposedly made, it ought to be regarded with critical distance. Whatever Anonyma may have said in 1947, Marek may well have misremembered it in sync with his own interpretation of both the Third Reich and the rape of German women in its aftermath. It is certainly ethically irresponsible to argue that the mass rapes balanced the score and thus exculpated Germans from the crimes committed in the Third Reich.

*Official Reception: Eine Frau in Berlin in the Media*

It was journalist and author Kurt Marek who persuaded Anonyma to make her diary public. The manuscript was first published in an English translation in 1954, and one year later, it appeared in nine more languages. In 1959, the first German edition -- which was published with the Swiss publishing company Helmut Kossodo -- promptly caused an outrage in West Germany, and the author was accused of besmirching the honor of German women. Rape and sexual collaboration for survival were taboo subjects in the postwar period since German men resented being reminded of ‘their’ humiliation through the rape of ‘their’ women as a consequence of the lost war. Anonyma decided against publishing her diary again, but gave permission to reissue it after her death. She died in 2001, and author Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the book’s editor, and the German publishing house Eichborn made the document available

again. When it was re-released in 2003, *Eine Frau in Berlin* was reviewed widely in German newspaper feuilletons and quickly became a bestseller. Reviews were consistently positive, calling it a book that provides an important perspective on the life of ordinary *Berliners* during the siege and early occupation of the city by the Red Army. It was praised for its juxtaposition of shocking directness and detached irony, its lack of self pity, Anonyma's sensitivity to language, her gift for precise observation, and clear judgment. It was widely considered not only an important historical document but also one with significant literary merit.

Felicitas von Lovenberg describes the diary in the *FAZ* as "ungeheuerlich" and "einzigartig", a book written in "einem bemerkenswert lakonischen, unsentimentalen, geradezu professionellen Ton" ("*Eine Frau in Berlin*" 33). For her, *Eine Frau in Berlin* constitutes "ein außerordentliches historisches und literarisches Dokument" (33). Joachim Kronsbein calls the book "ein menschlich berührendes und literarisch gewichtiges Dokument" ("Die Frau als Kriegsbeute" 182). And according to Erhard Schütz (2003), the diary gains its intensity "vor allem aus einer kalten Lakonie, einer bis zum Sarkasmus distanzierten Selbstbeobachtung. Sie hat etwas vom Nüchternheitsgestus und Kältepathos der an Hemingway geschulten Kriegsberichterstattung" (n.pag.). Reviews unanimously praise Anonyma for her meticulous observations of exceptional historical situations, for her reflection on complex ethical and moral questions, and for maintaining her integrity and consciousness under such exceptional circumstances. Several critics note that Anonyma finds it impossible to develop undifferentiated hatred for the soldiers of the Red Army. Elke Nicolini (2003), for instance, considers the diary "ein ergreifendes wie erstaunliches Dokument [...] weil sich in ihm keine Spur von Hass findet." A reviewer in *Damals: Das Magazin für Geschichte und Kultur* (2004) similarly notes, "bemerkenswert ist, dass die russischen Soldaten nicht per se verdammt werden, es bleibt trotz

aller Erniedrigung die Kraft zur Differenzierung” (“*Eine Frau in Berlin*” n.pag.). Katharina Döbler (2003) likewise writes that the victimizers have personalities, names, and the idiosyncrasies of individuals. According to Döbler, Anonyma differentiates “unter den Männern, die als Sieger, als Feinde, als Rächer durch Keller und Wohnungen ziehen: Sie zeichnet sie als Individuen, unterscheidet die verhinderten Romeos, die wirklichen Frauenhasser, die Wilden – sogar Unterwürfige sind dabei; und sie schätzt die Gebildeten mit ihren ausgeprägten Umgangsformen” (n.pag.). The critics thus acknowledge that Anonyma accomplishes representing the rape of German women without either assigning collective blame and without pitying herself.

However, a number of reviewers take Marek’s comment that Anonyma considered the rapes as something “was eine Rechnung ausglich” as if it were an inherent part of the diary rather than an editor’s remark reported some twelve years after it was (supposedly) made. Angela Gutzeit (2003), for instance, writes “sie hat mit wachem Verstand die ersten gesicherten Meldungen über das Geschehen in den Konzentrationslagern wie auch über das Wüten der Deutschen Wehrmacht in Osteuropa aufgenommen. Das alles führt sie zu einem in ihrer Lage unglaublich bemerkenswerten Gedanken, nämlich dem von der ausgleichenden Gerechtigkeit” (12). Similarly approving of this ethically irresponsible notion that two wrongs constitute “ausgleichende Gerechtigkeit,” Rüdiger Suchsland comments in his online article, “die Deutschen hatten die Sowjetunion überfallen, hatten gemordet, gebrandschatzt, vergewaltigt. Eine Frau, Anfang Dreißig, hält es zumindest für möglich, dass ihr da etwas geschieht, ‘was eine Rechnung ausglich’” (“*Eine Frau in Berlin*” n.pag.). And Hanna Leitgeb (2003) even argues:

Beim Lesen dieser Notizen wird einmal mehr deutlich, dass die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus mit dem gängigen Opfer/Täter-Schema nicht letztgültig zu erfassen ist. [...] Das Tagebuch erweitert vielmehr die Reihe der bekannten Quellentexte um eine Perspektive, in der es um die Deformierungen einer bürgerlichen Gesellschaft unter unvorstellbaren Belastungen geht. [...] Das Buch ist kein Zeugnis des Widerstands, kein Zeugnis eines nationalsozialistischen Mitläufers oder Täters oder Opfers, sondern eines anderen, ebenfalls deutschen Lebens zwischen alldem. Wir haben die Tagebücher der Anne Frank und die Viktor Klemperers [...] und nun haben wir auch diese Aufzeichnungen einer anonymen Frau, die diesen Kanon um eine wichtige Summe ergänzt. (n.pag.)

Although Anonyma's diary may well constitute a significant addition to the literary canon about the Third Reich, Leitgeb's comment obscures the fact that Anonyma was indeed a bystander to Nazi perpetration before she became a victim of the revenge enacted by some of its opponents. Furthermore, comparing Anonyma with Anne Frank and Viktor Klemperer ahistorically merges German victims and victims who were persecuted by the Nazis and comes too close to the notion ascribed by Marek to Anonyma that the mass rapes of German women balance a score and thus exculpate Germans from collective and/or individual guilt.

### *The Anonyma Controversy*

In September 2003, a debate emerged about the authenticity of the diary and Anonyma's identity after Jens Bisky's article "Wenn Jungen Weltgeschichte spielen, haben Mädchen stumme Rollen" appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2003). He questions the authenticity of the diary and argues that "das Buch [ist] als zeithistorisches Dokument wertlos" (16) because it

is not clear to what extent Anonyma edited the original document before the initial publication. Bisky stresses that the published diary is not the one she wrote in the spring of 1945. Referring to a note in the 2003 edition that “der Text folgt, mit einigen Korrekturen, der deutschen Erstausgabe” (16). Bisky moreover points out that the first edition from 1959 is not identical to the 2003 edition which reinforces his argument against the text’s historical authenticity. He furthermore argues that not only Anonyma but also Marek edited the text. Last but certainly not least, he argues that the diary could only be regarded as an authentic historical document if the identity of its author were known only to uncover her identity himself. Identifying her as Marta Hillers, according to Bisky, she was a German journalist and, since she wrote for some insignificant journals during the Third Reich, not only a passive bystander but an active Nazi follower. Hillers later married, moved to Switzerland, abandoned journalism, and disappeared from the public sphere.

The article generated a vehement controversy over Anonyma’s identity and the authenticity of the diary. Enzensberger was furious about the revelation of Anonyma’s name and Bisky’s accusations, and in an interview with *Der Spiegel* (2003) he calls Bisky an “Enthüllungsjournalisten” and “Schnüffler,” and accuses him of “Schamlosigkeit” (“Verdeckte Ermittlungen” 147). Rather than engaging in a rational debate over the authenticity of historical documents, the right of witnesses to anonymity or Marta Hiller’s journalistic publications in the Third Reich, Enzensberger’s response exacerbates Bisky’s accusatory rhetoric:

Die Autorin wußte sehr wohl, dass sie anonym bleiben wollte. Sie wollte sich weitere Demütigungen ersparen wie diejenigen, die ihr nun nach ihrem Tod zugemutet werden. Ihr damaliger Lebensgefährte, dem sie den Text zu lesen gab, wollte nach der Lektüre

nichts mehr mit ihr zu tun haben, und nach der Erstveröffentlichung des Buchs warf man ihr vor, die Ehre der deutschen Frau beschmutzt zu haben. Deshalb wollte sie einer Neuauflage zu Lebzeiten nicht zustimmen. Das war, wie sich zeigt, eine kluge Entscheidung. (“Verdeckte Ermittlungen” 147)

In another interview (“Profilneurose”) with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (2003) he adds: “Offenbar fand der Verfasser des Artikels eine gewisse Befriedigung darin, das Opfer einer Vergewaltigung auszuspionieren und ihren Namen der Öffentlichkeit preiszugeben. Ich finde das ekelhaft. Die Autorin hatte gute Gründe für ihren Wunsch, anonym zu bleiben.” Furthermore, Enzensberger notes that the fact that the 2003 edition is not identical to the 1959 text was clearly stated in the note to the 2003 edition. Hannelore Marek, Kurt Marek’s widow and custodian of the manuscript, indicated that the changes were not only minor but had also been authorized by Anonyma prior to her death. And although Bisky’s claim that the original notes taken during the Berlin occupation were later revised is true, this was likewise never obscured. In both the 1959 and the 2003 editions, the foreword explains that Anonyma wrote about her experiences contemporaneously from April to June 1945, producing ultimately three separate notebooks. In the summer of 1945, she converted the original notes into a coherent manuscript: “Dabei wurden aus Stichworten Sätze. Angedeutetes wurde verdeutlicht, Erinnerunges eingefügt. Lose Kritzelzettel fanden ihren Platz an gehöriger Stelle” (5).

In order to clarify the situation, the Eichborn publishing house hired well-known author Walter Kempowski to investigate the authenticity of the original handwritten manuscript, which had been in Hannelore Marek’s possession since her husband’s death in 1971. After closely

examining the original notes and typescript, Kempowski declared the diary authentic. Joachim Güntner (“*Eine Frau in Berlin*”) summarized Kempowski’s report as follows:

Die Durchsicht der Handschrift und des Typoskripts ergeben keinen Hinweis darauf, dass Marek - oder irgendeine andere Person - an der Herstellung des Manuskripts mitgewirkt haben. [...] Die datierten handschriftlichen Aufzeichnungen ‘tragen alle Merkmale des Authentischen’: zum Teil flüchtige, dann wieder ordentliche Schrift, wechselndes Schreibgerät (mal Tinte, mal Blei-, mal Rotstift), vergilbtes Papier und ein ‘unverwechselbarer Tagebuchton.’ [...] Allerdings bringen ihn Unterschiede zwischen den Handschriften und der Reinschrift auf Schreibmaschine zu dem Urteil, hier nun sei ‘der Text aus dem gerade zu Ende gegangenen Erlebnis heraus erfüllt’ worden.

When I contacted Hannelore Marek myself to ask if Anonyma or Kurt Marek had received and collected *Leserbriefe*, she wrote the following with respect to the authenticity question: “Allerdings hat Anonyma kurz vor ihrem Tode ihr Script und auch das Buch noch einmal gründlich durchgesehen – die Eichborn-Ausgabe ist absolut NICHT von fremder Feder verändert, sondern nur von der Autorin selbst [...] in wenigen Passagen.”

Only a few critics sided with Bisky in the controversy. Ursula März’s (2003) convoluted rhetoric in her *Frankfurter Rundschau* article seems to suggest that the diary lost its historical credibility:

Die Vorstellung [...] auf die Zeugnisse weiblicher Kriegsoffer, die Zeugnisse an Frauen verübter Kriegsverbrechen, mithin auf die Zeugnisse der Erfahrungen unserer Mütter und

Großmütter, werde ein Editions-niveau der B-Klasse angewandt, auf dem Fundierung durch Emotionalisierung ersetzt wird ('es ist so ein toller Text') - diese Vorstellung ist empörend. Es wäre die Sache von Leserinnen, Historikerinnen und Publizistinnen, einem solchen Buch die Anerkennung zu entziehen. (15)

While März seems to suggest nonsensically that the diary is inauthentic because it generated an emotionalized reception, Ina Hartwig (2003) comments in the same paper:

Nach wie vor kann man sich dem Text der Anonyma auf vielen Wegen fragend nähern. Die radikalste Frage wäre sicherlich die: Kann eine Frau überhaupt so kühl und zugleich so einfühlsam über die Triebdurchbrüche der Soldaten, über die erlittene Vergewaltigung berichten? Eine andere Frage ist nach wie vor tabuisiert, und auch das Gutachten von Kempowski löst sie nicht: Wer war die Tagebuch-Schreiberin? Der SZ-Redakteur Jens Bisky hat viel Prügel dafür einstecken müssen, dass er die Identität der vor zwei Jahren verstorbenen Verfasserin gelüftet hat. Die Aggression, die ihm entgegen schlägt, bleibt rätselhaft. Man könnte vermuten, dass sie weniger mit verletzten Anstandsregeln zu tun hat, als vielmehr mit dem Ergebnis seiner Recherche. Demnach wäre die Anonyma eine damals junge Frau namens Marta Hillers, die sich mit propagandistisch gefärbtem Journalismus durch die Nazizeit gemogelt hat. Die Wirklichkeit könnte weniger erhehend sein als der Wunsch nach moralischer Integrität. Es ist dieser Wunsch, der das Denken vernebelt. (17)



It is precisely questions like Marta Hiller's role as a passive bystander or active follower in the Third Reich, how the knowledge of her past may affect the reception of her diary, and why she reflected so little on the diary itself on her life in the Third Reich that were disregarded in the hyperbolic journalistic debate. Most critics emphatically rejected that Bisky revealed the identity of the author and, rightly, argued that he had no evidence for his allegations of inauthenticity.<sup>30</sup> Felicitas von Lovenberg (2004), for instance, wrote:

Mehr als nur die Grenzen des guten Geschmacks waren jedoch verletzt, als Jens Bisky von der Süddeutschen Zeitung das Werk ohne Belege als Fälschung darstellte: Angeblich, so insinuierte er, habe C. W. Ceram alias Kurt Marek an dem Text entscheidend mitgeschrieben. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Herausgeber des Bandes, wies die Beschuldigung ebenso zurück wie Hannelore Marek, Witwe Mareks und Rechteinhaberin des Buchs. Dennoch war der Vorwurf in der Welt - bis jetzt. Walter Kempowski, Herausgeber zahlreicher Tagebücher und Begründer eines eigenen Tagebuch-Archivs, hat die Authentizität der Aufzeichnungen der Anonyma überprüft. In seinem Gutachten, das an diesem Dienstag im Feuilleton der Frankfurter Allgemeinen dokumentiert wird, bestätigt er nicht nur die Echtheit der Vorlage und den 'unverwechselbaren Tagebuchton', sondern weist auch darauf hin, daß der Verlag im Vorwort über Herkunft und Schicksal der Aufzeichnungen bereits detailliert Auskunft gegeben habe. Was bleibt von der Affäre? Genugtuung über die Rehabilitierung der Autorin und der schale Nachgeschmack einer Verleumdung. ("Walter Kempowski" 33)

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Joachim Güntner's article "Verdächtigung ohne Beleg" from September 28, 2003, in *NZZ online*: <http://www.nzz.ch/2003/10/01/fe/article94OYZ.html> (accessed August 1, 2009); and Felicitas von Lovenberg's article "Eine Frau in Berlin" in the *FAZ* from September 25, 2003.

Renée Zucker even dubiously argues that the historical authenticity of the diary is irrelevant because it is subjectively truthful:

Insofern würde ich *Eine Frau in Berlin*, von wem auch immer sie unter welchen Umständen auch immer geschrieben wurde, immer wieder verteidigen wollen: als einen Text, der mich erschüttert und beeindruckt hat über das hinaus, was er beschreibt – und der mir die Erfahrung einer Generation sehr deutlich gezeigt hat, die ich in dieser Klarheit vorher nicht gesehen habe. Die Auseinandersetzung über Anonyma [...] hat etwas mit dem Recht auf subjektive Erfahrung zu tun, mit Kriterien wie Wahrheit, Verlässlichkeit und Lauterkeit. (“Erfahrung einer Generation” 14)

H.-J. von Leesen (2003) reports with ethically questionable *Schadenfreude*: “Unbeschadet davon steht das Buch *Eine Frau in Berlin* jetzt auf der Bestsellerliste” (n.pag.).

#### *Vernacular Reception: Reader Reviews and Comments*

In order to analyze how the average readers reacted to *Eine Frau in Berlin* and to explore how their reception relates to the views expressed in newspaper articles I sought to analyze reviews and comments by readers. However, I was unable to obtain *Leserbriefe*. I both contacted Eichborn, who published the Germany 2003 edition and Henry Holt and Company, the American publisher of the 2005 English edition. The latter informed me that they do not keep such archival material and Eichborn responded that they did not receive any *Leserbriefe*. I furthermore contacted Hannelore Marek, who wrote that such *Leserbriefe* do not exist, neither for the 1959 nor for the 2003 edition:

In all den Jahren seiner Veröffentlichung – die allererste Auflage mit einbezogen – hat es überhaupt keine Leser-Reaktionen in Form von Briefen gegeben. Gewiß ist auch dieses Gebaren als ein Besonderes zu werten. Hinzu kommt, dass vor rund fünfzig Jahren das Leserpotential die direkt Betroffenen waren [...] indessen die heutigen Leserinnen bereits deren Kinder und Enkelkinder sind.

It is unlikely that *Eine Frau in Berlin* should not have received any reactions by readers. The first edition in 1959 was very controversial and was accused of besmirching the honor of German women. It seems likely that outraged readers would have written letters to express their anger. The 2003 edition was a bestseller and widely reviewed in German newspapers, and it is highly unlikely that none of its vast numbers of readers wrote *Leserbriefe*. If it were indeed the case, the reasons may be that the book was written by an anonymous woman, who had also already died in 2001, and hence could no longer be reached by letters. However, this argument does not pertain to the 1959 edition. Despite the anonymity of the author, readers could have sent their letters to the publisher with the request to forward them to the author. It seems more likely that the author did not retain the letters she received because they were so hostile. However, given the dominance of the computer today and the death of the author, readers may have opted to sharing their opinions with other readers via internet. And indeed, searching the internet for reader reviews of *Eine Frau in Berlin* was successful. Hence, the analysis of the vernacular reception is based solely on internet sources<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> I analyzed the reader reviews posted on three websites: 1) the review section on Amazon.de : [http://www.amazon.de/Eine-Frau-Berlin-Tagebuchaufzeichnungen-April/dp/3442732166/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241468468&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.de/Eine-Frau-Berlin-Tagebuchaufzeichnungen-April/dp/3442732166/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1241468468&sr=8-1) (accessed August 1, 2009); 2) the review section on buecher.de: <http://www.buecher.de/shop/BerichteErinnerungen/Eine-Frau-in->

Reader comments are likewise largely positive. Only ten out of the total of about fifty readers refer to the debate about the authenticity of the book. While this may not proportionally reflect how many readers followed the discussions about the diary's authenticity and the author's identity in the newspapers, it seems to indicate that the debate only reached a minority among the actual readers. Helgakurz<sup>32</sup> (2008), who summarizes the newspaper debate and condemns that Anonyma's identity was revealed, stresses that every rape victim should have the right to stay incognito. She furthermore argues that "auf mich wirkt das Buch stimmig, es ist mit stilistischem Geschick und schriftstellerischem Talent geschrieben. Faszinierend ist der distanzierte, manchmal kalt berechnende Ton. Allerdings glaube auch ich, dass die Autorin ihre Aufzeichnungen später überarbeitet und ausgeschmückt hat." However, she seems to substantiate her notion that the diary is authentic by recourse to its aesthetic merit which not only seems illogical, after all fiction is also skillfully composed, but apparently for the same reason she considers the diary to have been edited subsequently. EinKunde ("Beeindruckend"), who likewise believes that the text was edited later, similarly argued that "Die schönste Wahrheit (in einem Buch) nützt nichts, wenn sie nicht lesenswert formuliert ist. Lesenswerte Wahrheit liegt hier ohne Zweifel vor." Kristina (2007) who criticizes Bisky for revealing Anonyma's identity and, echoing the emotionalized rhetoric of the newspaper debate, argues that the debate about the diary's authenticity did not diminish the book's value:

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Berlin/Anonyma/products\_products/detail/prod\_id/23327458/vnode/1/lfa/quicksearch-index-1-titel/ (accessed August 1, 2009); 3) the review section on ciao.de: [http://www.ciao.de/Kommentare-zu-Testbericht\\_Eine\\_Frau\\_in\\_Berlin\\_Anonyma\\_2845439](http://www.ciao.de/Kommentare-zu-Testbericht_Eine_Frau_in_Berlin_Anonyma_2845439) (accessed August 1, 2009). However, all quotes are taken from the Amazon.de reviews for *Eine Frau in Berlin*.

<sup>32</sup> Internet users get user names in order to stay anonymous. These names sometimes ignore spelling and upper/lower case rules and other regulations. In this dissertation, I quote the original usernames as found on the respective Internet forums.

Da Anonymas mutmaßlicher Name inzwischen unaufhaltsam durch die Medien gegeistert ist, halte ich es für scheinheilig, so zu tun als sei der Wunsch der Autorin gewahrt worden. Die skrupellosen, wühlmausartigen Recherchen sind nicht mehr rückgängig zu machen. Auch wenn sich wohl einige Menschen auf Kosten des Buches zu profilieren versucht haben, so ändert es für mich nichts an dessen Wert.

H.P. Roentgen (2004) considers the discussion about the book's authenticity "völlig daneben" and argues that it is irrelevant whether the diary was edited later by Anonyma herself or even by Marek because, edited or not, it depicts "ein 'echtes' Bild des Frühlings 1945." Reviews written by readers who experienced the end of the war, some of them in Berlin, state that Anonyma's diary reads like an authentic account of that time.

Like the newspaper articles, the online reader reviews are entirely positive and consider the diary "einzigartig" (Christian Junghans 2008), "beeindruckend" (EinKunde "Beeindruckend"), "wichtig" (ruessler 2008), and "ein schonungsloses präzises Zeitzeugnis der letzten Kriegstage" (H.P. Roentgen 2004). Readers praise Anonyma's direct style and precise descriptions. They consider the diary a realistic account of life in April/May 1945 in Berlin, which was dominated by hunger, despair, violence and fear. Readers are furthermore impressed by her objective and self-reflective account, which lacks sentimentality and self-pity and reflects her differentiation among the perpetrators, whom she does not condemn collectively. Most of the readers are impressed that she is able to report objectively and factually about her perpetrators and to provide honest characterizations of the soldiers of the Red Army. According to helladres (2004), "was mich ganz besonders beeindruckt hat, ist ihre immerwährende Objektivität bei der Charakterisierung der 'Eroberer' [...] auch, wenn sie von diesen schmutzigen Ereignissen

berichtet, bleibt Anonyma sachlich. Sie bemüht sich sogar in solchen Fällen noch um ein gewisses Verständnis [...]” EinKunde (“Ein Schicksal”) similarly writes, “bemerkenswert ist, daß die Autorin weder anklagt noch Rachegeanken schürt - sie schildert einfach und geradezu abgeklärt, was passiert ist [...] mir wäre es kaum gelungen so gänzlich ohne Hass-und Rachegefühle zu berichten.” And according to TinaRostock (2007) Anonyma “wertet nicht, schert nicht über einen Kamm, sie hasst nicht. Sie schafft es, trotz dieses Horrors, die Menschen zu sehen hinter den barbarischen Akten.”

Readers agree that *Eine Frau in Berlin* is an important historical document of life at the end of the war. Anonyma conveys to them the fear and claustrophobia inside a bomb shelter during a bombardment, the breakdown of city life and civil society, the behavior of the victorious Soviet soldiers, and the enforced labor clearing out the rubble for food. They consider it a brilliantly vivid description of life in Berlin’s ruins. Bücherfreak’s (2008) summarizing comment is paradigmatic: “Ein tolles Buch, ein Zeitzeugnis, wie es kaum besser geschrieben sein kann. Es ist berührend und zu herzen gehend, es ist wahr und schonungslos und literarisch ganz sicher ein Leckerbissen. Sie urteilt klar und nimmt kein Blatt vor den Mund, sie stempelt aber auch die Russen nicht komplett ab, sie gibt dem Leser ein komplettes Gefühls- und Gedankenbild dieser Zeit.” ruessler (2008) similarly writes, “dieses Buch ist wichtig. Jeder, der sich mit den Geschehnissen von 1945 befaßt, sollte es gelesen haben. Schonungslos und offen schildert die Autorin die letzten Kriegstage und die Zeit danach, wie sie die Berliner Bevölkerung erlebt hat - vor allem die Frauen. Das Leid wird ohne Dramatisierung geschildert.”

While reviewers welcome the fact that this subject finally entered the public sphere, like Anonyma, they do not express collective hatred toward the Russian soldiers but consider the mass rapes emblematic of the inhumanity of war. According to H.P. Roentgen (2004), “nicht nur

die der Russen, auch die deutsche Wehrmacht, die Japaner und die anderen Armeen haben keine weiße Weste. Man kann nicht junge Männer jahrelang in Kommissstiefel stecken, durch die Weltgeschichte scheuchen, Kopf und Kragen riskieren lassen, sie jahrelang in Männerbünden halten und erwarten, dass sie sich anständig und ritterlich gegen Frauen verhalten.” Andrea (2003) similarly argues that “das Buch zeigt auch, wie aus Menschen, die zu Friedenszeiten wahrscheinlich liebevolle Ehemänner und Väter sind, durch diese furchtbaren Kriege Unmenschen werden, die ihre eigene Verzweiflung an Schwächeren auslassen.” The dominant notion among readers is thus ethically commendable but epistemologically questionable because of ahistorical pacifism. EinKunde (“Eine Mahnung”) likewise writes, that “für alle Generationen, die das Glück hatten, ohne die schreckliche Erfahrungen eines Krieges aufzuwachsen, sollte dieses Buch zur Pflichtlektüre gehören.” Readers consider it a document that depicts the horrors of war when social conventions collapse and moral standards vanish in the face of extreme violence. As H.P. Roentgen (2004) notes, “der Krieg macht im allgemeinen aus Menschen keine bessere Menschen, sondern verroht.” And Heidiz (2008) writes, “man muss einfach wissen, wie schrecklich diese Zeit war, um zu begreifen, dass dies nie wieder passieren darf.” Spanierin (2008) also perceives *Eine Frau in Berlin* not as a diary about the Second World War but about war in general:

Es geht wirklich NICHT um die Nazis im Buch, sondern um Krieg und wie die normalen Menschen während des Krieges leben bzw. versuchen zu überleben, Frauen und Kinder, alte Menschen [...] sie sind allein, die Männer im Krieg. Man muss das Buch lesen, denn sie erzählt was Krieg tatsächlich bedeutet, und zwar für die normale Leute. Das Buch ist sehr hart aber so ist das Leben auch, im Krieg, und Vergewaltigungen kommen immer im

Krieg vor. Deswegen hat die Erzählung nicht unbedingt mit den Nazis zu tun. Das ist immer so, was ist dann im Kosovo passiert oder im Bürgerkrieg in Spanien? Das Gleiche.

Furthermore, two reviews compared *Anonyma* to the diary of Anne Frank. According to TomKatschi (2003), “wer Anne Frank gelesen hat, wird an diesem Buch nicht vorbeikommen.” And EvilElvis (2007) writes, “dieses Buch sollte als Pendant zu Die Tagebücher der Anne Frank in deutschen Schulen gelesen werden.” because, as Ruessler (2008) argues, “schließlich sollte die deutsche Geschichte nicht nur einer einseitigen Betrachtung unterzogen werden.” As mentioned above, merging the victim positions of Anne Frank and *Anonyma* is ahistorical and ethically irresponsible as it can serve to relativize Nazi crimes by balancing the score in order to exculpate Germans from collective and/or individual guilt.

However, it is most striking that, as in the newspaper reviews, none of the readers reflects on *Anonyma*'s role in the Third Reich, to what extent this knowledge impacted their reception, or on the role of German women in the Third Reich generally. Readers who followed the discussion in newspapers knew that *Anonyma* was a journalist named Marta Hillers, who wrote for minor Nazi journals and that both Hiller and Marek had connections to the Nazi party. Although she was not a perpetrator, she was a follower. However, whether or not readers knew *Anonyma*'s identity, the question of her involvement in Nazi ideology and practice arises in the diary itself as the author reflects on it in her diary entries, if only briefly. *Anonyma* also mentions, although likewise only in passing, the death camps and the mass killings of Jewish victims, and the question of collective German guilt and responsibility.

The complex question of how the crimes committed by Germans and those inflicted on them can be historically and ethically adequately represented, which is essentially the core



question of the *Opferdebatte*, was ignored in both the vernacular and official memory generated in reader and newspaper reviews. This indicates that in contemporary German cultural memory ordinary Germans, both bystanders and followers, are simplistically re-conceptualized as victims rather than as occupying a more complex subject position. While one may argue that readers and journalists took collective German guilt and responsibility as a self evident, it seems more likely that because they like and empathize with the author, even identify with her, they do not want to complicate their initial empathic response to the diary by reflections on her past. After all, Anonyma “schreibt aus der Sicht eines ganz normalen Menschen” (EinKunde “Ein Schicksal”) and is “eine Frau wie du und ich” (Lindenhof 2003).

Unlike the newspaper reviews which invoke Marek’s comment that Anonyma considered the rapes to be balancing the score between German crimes and the crimes inflicted on Germans, reader reviews do not explicitly make such an unethically relativizing claim. However, both the official and the vernacular reception of *Eine Frau in Berlin* reflects and reinforces the tendency that dominated both West German collective memory of the 1950s and the current *Opferdebatte* of exculpating bystanders and followers from guilt by blaming only a small group of evil Nazis who seduced the essentially decent German people. Both the official and the vernacular reception even seems to be less critical with respect to the role of ordinary Germans in the Third Reich than Anonyma was herself. At least she reflected on her past, the Nazi crimes, and her share in the collective guilt, if only briefly, while the reception essentially effaced these core questions in order to cast ordinary Germans primarily if not solely as victims in sync with the dominant discourse of the *Opferdebatte*.

*The Film Adaptation of Eine Frau in Berlin*

*Eine Frau in Berlin* was recently adapted into a movie, which premiered on October 23, 2008. It was directed by Max Färberböck, who also directed *Aimée & Jaguar*, which is likewise set during the Third Reich and was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Its producer Günther Rohrbach had previously produced such successful German films as *Das Boot* (1981), *Aimée und Jaguar* (1999) and *Stalingrad* (1993). The film was produced by Constantin Film in cooperation with the ZDF. It won the the 24<sup>th</sup> Santa Barbara International Film Festival in the Best International Feature category. With Nina Hoss Färberböck got a very successful and well-known actress for the leading character. The other characters are played by Fassbinder icon Irm Hermann, Juliane Köhler, who played Eva Braun in *Der Untergang* and Aimée in *Aimée und Jaguar*, August Diehl, and Rüdiger Vogler. The Soviet soldiers are played by Russian actors like the Russian theater and film actor Yevgeni Sidikhin, who plays Major Andrej Rybkin. For the first time, a major German motion picture focuses solely on the rapes of German women during the occupation in 1945, a subject that, like rape in wartime more generally, had been taboo for a long time.<sup>33</sup> It was depicted in German cinema and TV only sporadically and marginally, for instance, in *Die Blechtrommel* (1979), *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (1980), and, most recently, in the ZDF two-part mini-series *Die Flucht* (2007). Even Helke Sander's *Befreier und Befreite* (1992) generated some hostile reactions. Several ARD networks did not want to support her project based on the explanation that after the *Wende* one should not emphasize the *Feindbild Russland*. And at the premiere, the film was met with hostility and some demonstrators even called to boycott *Befreier und Befreite* ("Das Ende des Verschweigens").

<sup>33</sup> See also Jasmila Žbanić's film *Esmas Geheimnis – Grbavica* (2005), which represents an account of the mass rapes during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After the war, German women who had been raped during flight or occupation did not talk about their experiences out of shame. In East Germany, the cruelties of the Red Army constituted a taboo which was necessitated by the GDR's master narratives of Marxism/Leninism and antifascism, both of which were based on implicit and explicit Sovietophilia. Hence, the GDR government eradicated these crimes from acknowledged history. West Germany did not want to harm the already fragile relationship with East Germany during the Cold War. Although it was neither actively preserved in familiar-communicative nor in cultural memory, the taboo subject was common knowledge. In the conservative 1950s, which were dominated by the economic miracle in West Germany, public and private discourse about the mass rapes was impossible. Especially the related subject that many women had been forced to prostitute themselves with occupation soldiers, predominantly with Americans who essentially paid the women with food, cigarettes and alcohol, in order to save their own life and the lives of their families, earned them only contempt. These women were called *Ami-Huren*, *Tommy-Bräute* or *Russen-Liebchen*. And when the German magazine *Stern* asked in a 1948 issue "Hat die deutsche Frau versagt?," the magazine received thousands of letters in which the *Kriegsheimkehrer* responded that "diese Frage muss tausendmal bejaht werden" and that "der deutsche Mann hat dem Feind sechs Jahre widerstanden, die deutsche Frau nur fünf Minuten" (qtd. in "Das Ende des Verschweigens" n.pag.). When Anonyma's diary was first published in 1959, reactions were similarly hostile and critics accused her of besmirching the honor of German women. While the 1960s saw the liberal left move towards the political center, it was also the time of extreme leftist rebellion against the political mainstream, most cogently embodied in the student movements and the Baader-Meinhof Group, who were questioning their parents' generation's alleged clean state with respect to Nazi crimes. As a result, the political

awareness that all Germans bore responsibility for the Nazi crimes came to the fore, and it was impossible to discuss German women as victims. However, the subject was covertly present in the *Vertriebenenverbänden* and right wing discourse. Only in recent years, particularly since the *Wende*, did the depiction of Germans as victims in books, films and TV become more and more accepted and even popular, thus engendering the *Opferdebatte* over how German victimhood ought to be represented in the context of the crimes inflicted by Germans in the Third Reich.

Given the subject matter, adapting the diary into a movie was not an easy project and the result is a mixed one. In the following, I will first discuss the positive attributes and then turn to a critique of the movie. *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* publically exonerates the raped women and draws attention to the systematic use of rape in wartime to humiliate and degrade the enemy. It reflected and reinforced public discussion of this subject. Like the diary, the film refrains from simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomies and seeks to contextualize the rapes in the history of the Second World War. In fact, Färberböck explicitly stated in an interview with kinofenster.de, “das Thema meines Films ist nicht das Leiden der Deutschen” and that to avoid playing into the revanchist discourse that constitutes the most extreme position in the *Opferdebatte*, or as he put it, “um sich nicht gleich mit der deutschen Opferperspektive zu identifizieren” he had the first draft of the script written from the Russian perspective (“Es existierte eine Kultur” n.pag.). The film reflects to a greater extent than the diary itself, that the German women are not only victims but prior to their victimization had had various roles and subject positions within the Nazi system. Like the diary, the film portrays the Russian soldiers as individuals.

Ultimately, however, the film does not manage the balancing act of historically contextualizing the mass rapes while also portraying them as horrific individual experiences and systematically employed crimes. Because in seeking contextualization, the film fails to

adequately depict the vast extent of the rapes and the terror and the immensity of suffering they generated among the women. While the film follows the diary in depicting the soldiers of the Red Army not as indistinguishable brutal monsters but as individuals, this depiction seems too politically correct. Not only does the film include precisely one representative of every stereotypical figure, such as, the naive farm boy, the brutal soldier, the educated major, but most of the men are simply too nice to commit brutal mass rapes. Russian friendliness and generosity is also emphasized by the friendly relationship between Germans and Russians, which culminates in the *Siegesfeier* where Germans and Russians are singing, drinking, and laughing together. Furthermore, the sole explanation for the violent and brutal behavior of Russian soldiers and officers emphasized throughout the movie is that they take revenge for what the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* did to their families. Anonyma's neighbor, for instance, states, "wenn die Russen mit uns machen, was unsere bei denen angerichtet haben, dann Gnade uns Gott." And when Anonyma translates for a young Russian soldier, she learns that he had seen how German soldiers had killed infants by smashing their heads against a wall. Moreover, while Major Andrej Rybkin was divorced in the diary, in the film his wife had been murdered by the Nazis. The film not only unethically justifies the rapes as a balancing of the score, as if two wrongs made a right, but, reflecting the dominant patriarchal discourse, omits that mass rapes in wartime are always perpetrated by men on women. In other words, the film reflects the unethical and nonsensical notion that it is the women's task to exculpate the crimes committed by 'their' men by enduring comparable brutalization. Although revenge constituted one reason for the mass rapes of German women, it is neither the sole reason nor does it minimize the extent of either the crimes committed by German or by Soviet soldiers. Armies regularly employ rape as a weapon in war in order to humiliate the enemy and assault an entire community and it seems widely accepted that

women, who are thus transformed into objects, constitute part of the loot they have earned and are entitled to. The politically correct representation of the Soviet army and the reduction of the reasons for their mass rapes to revenge not only distorts the historical reality but also generates the unethical notion that such revenge constitutes justified payback which essentially evens the score.

Although the film essentially suggests that the mass rapes committed by German and Russian soldiers cancel each other out, thus exculpating both the German and the Russian male perpetrators, it does not exonerate the ordinary German women from their collective guilt as Nazi followers. In fact, the film deviates from the diary in the representation of the women in general and Anonyma in particular. Anonyma casts herself as a bystander when she asks but does not exactly answer “War ich selber dafür? Dagegen? Ich war jedenfalls mittendrin und habe die Luft eingeatmet, die uns umgab und die uns färbte, auch wenn wir es nicht wollten” (183). The film, however, represents her as an enthusiastic Nazi follower, who had a good life in the Third Reich, for instance, early on in the film she is seen at a lavish dinner party, a scene that does not occur in the diary. And later, when the Major asks her “Sind Sie Faschistin?” Anonyma does not answer. While women certainly actively and voluntarily participated in the Nazi system, the depiction of Anonyma as a committed supporter of the regime not only deviates significantly from the diary but appears to be the other side of the coin with regard to the film’s political correctness. The male perpetrators, both Russian and German, are almost exonerated whereas the female Nazi followers and bystanders, who subsequently became victims of mass rapes, are not.

Another significant deviance from the diary is that the film transforms Anonyma’s relationship with Major Andrej Rybkin. In the diary, Anonyma decides after a particularly brutal

rape, to find herself a protector: “Ganz klar. Hier muß ein Wolf her, der mir die Wölfe vom Leib hält. Offizier so hoch es geht, Kommandant, General, was ich kriegen kann.” (74) Although Anonyma admits in the diary that she feels some kind of friendship for the Major since he is educated, well mannered and not a brutal rapist, nevertheless, the relationship between them is not based on love but on the simple pragmatics of quasi-prostitutional barter, sex for food, and protection. However in the film the motivation of “Essen anschlafen” (206) and protection from further rapes is transformed into a sentimental love story between Anonyma and her handsome protector. The sentimental love story culminates in a romantic night during which the Major whispers: “Ich will Sie umarmen ganzes Leben lang.” Of course, the impossible love between enemies does not have a future. And when Rybkin has to leave Berlin shortly thereafter and they have to bid farewell, Anonyma clings to his hand and asks with tears in her eyes: “Wie sollen wir leben?” This love story is a culmination of kitsch and melodrama and demotes the diary to a cheap *Groschenroman*. The movie even generates a jealous rival for the Major’s affection, a female Russian soldier, but the rather plain girl does not stand a chance against beautiful Anonyma, who can not even be deterred in her affection when the rival threatens in a melodramatic showdown: “Hauen Sie ab [...] Lassen Sie die Finger von ihm [...] Ihr habt seine Frau gehängt.”

While the diary is factual, attempts to be as objective as possible, and is devoid of sentimentality and victim pathos, the movie adaptation is melodramatic and sentimental. Although the film appears politically ubercorrect to prevent any accusations of revisionism, which is a laudable intention, it only seems to generate politically correct kitsch and it actually supports dubious notions of ethics and morals. German women are not only cast as Nazi followers but also their victimization is minimized. The film conveys the message that the

occupation of Berlin was not that traumatic, after all there was still room for love. It fails to convey the vast extent of the terror generated by the violence enacted by the victors in mass rapes and large-scale looting. The horror and the fear the women had to endure over a long period of time, the fact that young girls and old women were brutally raped, the general sense of lawlessness and violence are not adequately reflected. Last but not least, the quasi-prostitution depicted in the diary is transformed into a love story as if bartering sex for protection and food, enforced on many German women after the war, is still considered as immoral in the new millennium as it was in the 1940s and 1950s.

The mass rapes of German women have to be contextualized in the history of the Third Reich in order to be represented responsibly, which includes reflections on the diverse roles women did play in the Nazi system. But at the same time, the scale and brutality of the mass rapes must be acknowledged. And it is deeply unethical to consider these rapes a just form of punishment for German women that balances the score for their role as Nazi followers and/or the crimes committed by German soldiers. The film belittles the crimes committed by the Soviet army on German women for fear of invoking Nazi stereotypes of Russians, relativizing the crimes committed by the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* and exculpating German women from the collective guilt of bystanders and followers. It constitutes a falsification of history as it reflects none of the actual brutalities, minimizes the extent of the mass rapes, ignores that significant numbers of women died from the injuries, were killed after being raped or committed suicide, and does not critique the silence enforced onto the victims by the patriarchal hegemony of 1950s West Germany.



*The Official Reception in Newspaper Reviews*

Unlike the diary which was largely praised by critics, the film adaptation received more criticism than praise. Nevertheless, virtually all critics welcomed the fact that the movie broaches the taboo issue of mass rape during wartime and raised awareness of the worldwide prevalence of this crime. Christiane Peitz (2008) for instance, writes in her online article, “Vergewaltigungen gibt es noch in den Kriegen von heute, trotz Ächtung durch die Vereinten Nationen. Daran wird dieser Film nichts ändern. Aber er kann eine Ahnung vermitteln: von der Verwüstung der Seelen, von dem, was Jahrzehnte verschwiegen wurde, vom Lebensgefühl, das vorübergehend keine Vergangenheit kennt und keine Zukunft, sondern nur die Allgegenwart der Angst.” Critics furthermore considered the film a minor but nevertheless significant contribution to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Ann Claire Richter (2008) writes in the *Braunschweiger Zeitung* that “als Teil der kollektiven Erinnerungskultur mag Anonyma ein Puzzlestein sein und ein Beitrag, der Balsam auf die seelischen Wunden der Opfer salbt. Spät, aber immerhin. Ihnen wird auf diesem Wege wenigstens ein bisschen Gerechtigkeit zuteil” (n.pag.).

Most reviews published in daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and online articles<sup>34</sup> consider the movie too melodramatic and kitschy. Rüdiger Suchsland (“Verbotene Liebe”) considers it “wahnsinnig langweilig und bieder” and “ganz und gar schlecht,” and Renée Zucker (“Schweigen und gucken”) wrote in the *taz* that “wer das Buch schätzt, sollte sich den Film sparen.” Negative reviews offer several points of criticism. First, they criticize the movie setting and music. Hadwiga Fertsch-Röver (2008) critiques in her online review the “pseudo-historisierende Kulisse” and Peter Körte (2008) notes in the *FAZ am Sonntag*, “das Kulissen-Berlin sieht nicht aus wie Berlin [...] selbst das in Kalifornien gebaute Weltkriegsberlin in *The*

<sup>34</sup> I have analyzed approximately 100 reviews in various German print and online newspapers and magazines which provides a representative overview, even if the corpus does not include all movie reviews published.

*Good German* sah berlinerischer aus” (27). In addition, reviewers agree that the music is too emotional and melodramatic, calling the soundtrack “Klimperkitsch” (Suchsland “Verbotene Liebe”) or “sentimentale Illustrationsmusik” (Lenssen 2008).

Secondly, critics admonish that the horror and violence of rape are not adequately conveyed and that the deep psychological effects of rape on women are not depicted at all. According to the review in Kulturnews.de (“*Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin*”),

blendet der Film jede Art von expliziter Vergewaltigungsszene einfach aus. Das ist als drehe man einen Film über die Bombenangriffe auf Hamburg und zeige keine Toten. Schon nach wenigen Filmminuten haben sich *Anonyma* und die anderen Frauen, die im Verlauf des Films nie näher und tiefergehend eingeführt wurden, mit der Situation arrangiert, und das Schänden der hilflosen Berlinerinnen endet stets vor einer sich schliessenden Tuer, als sei dies alles ein keuscher Liebesfilm. Eine wohl unbeabsichtigte, aber ungeheuerliche Verharmlosung der historisch belegten und im Nachkriegsdeutschland mit aggressivstem Willen verdrängten Geschehens [...] *Anonyma Eine Frau in Berlin* lässt kalt, erregt keinerlei Mitgefühl, bleibt stets nur oberflächliche Darstellung gesichtslosen Elends. Doch er sollte weh tun, unerträglich sein und schockieren [...] Das ist, jenseits der unverzeihlichen Taten der Eroberer, ein Skandal.

Thomas Linden (2008) similarly argued in *Kölnische Rundschau* “dass die Frauen ihre Situation putzmunter akzeptieren, wirkt auch zu unglaubwürdig.” And Matthias Dell (2008) writes in *Der Freitag* that the film neglects “den Albtraum der Vergewaltigungen zu zeigen, was einer Verharmlosung gleich kommt: Das, was Qualität und Erfolg des Buchs ausgemacht hat, die

Hölle der Erfahrung, bleibt im Film im kunstgewerblichen Rahmen, aus dem nichts fallen darf, was 20.15 Uhr in der ARD jemanden verstören könnte.” Reviewers argue that conveying the physical violence of rape and its severe psychological aftereffects is the crucial quality of the book and that the movie does not transmit that. They critique that the film effaces the ubiquity of the mass rapes, the brutality with which they were enacted, the rape of young girls and of Jewish women, who had come out of hiding or survived concentration camps, and the frequency of suicides among the raped women.

For many critics, the failure of representing the nightmare of rape goes hand in hand with the characterization of German women and Russian soldiers which constitutes the third component of criticism. Reviewers argue that the politically correct film aims not to offend anyone, a tendency that Joachim Kronsbein (“Tränen”) calls an inability of choosing a moral position: “Färberböck will seinen Figuren offenbar nicht zu nahe treten. Den Russen nicht und den deutschen Frauen auch nicht. Scham? Political Correctness? Oder die Unfähigkeit, sich moralisch zu positionieren? So entsteht ein quälend betulicher Film ohne Dramatik, ohne Kraft und Wucht.” Martina Schürmann (2008) similarly argues in *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* that “Färberböck will das Schweigen brechen und von einem der grausigsten Kapitel des Zweiten Weltkriegs erzählen, aber dabei wirklich niemanden zu nahe treten. Der Feind in Anonymas Bett soll zugleich auch ein menschliches Antlitz haben. Dieser Wille zur Entdämonisierung ist seit einiger Zeit Trend in der cineastischen Nachkriegsrezeption. Es ist auch eine Furcht vor dem Anecken, eine Relativierung des Grauens, die in diesem Film als Sieg der Liebe und Menschlichkeit gefeiert wird” (n.pag.).

Although critics acknowledge that Färberböck tried to present the Red Army soldiers devoid of Nazi and more generally anti-communist stereotypes, they criticize that they are

essentially cast as the ‘good guys’ rather than as perpetrators. The strongest point of criticism is that the film constantly emphasizes that the Russian soldiers only took revenge for the terrible violence their own families had to suffer on the hands of German soldiers which unethically justifies the rapes of the German women as a balancing of scores: “Die Schilderung eines Wehrmachtsverbrechens wird als Motivation der kollektiven Vergeltung in die Waagschale geworfen,” Daniel Kothenschulte (2008) admonishes in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Although most reviewers grant that revenge might have been one reason for the mass rapes they unanimously critique the supposed poetic justice of retribution as one crime cannot be atoned by committing another. Critics also pointed out that revenge could not have constituted a motive for the rapes of women in Ukraine and Russia, who had just been liberated from forced labor.

Reviewers also find fault with how German women are portrayed in *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin*, particularly that they are depicted as loyal to the Nazi regime. Although Germans were collectively responsible for the war and the crimes that had been committed in their name, reviewers criticize that the film deviates from the diary as Anonyma did not describe herself as an avid Nazi supporter. Rüdiger Suchsland (“Verbotene Liebe”), for instance, writes, “‘une fille de Führer’ wird die Anonyma von Franzosen genannt, vor dem Krieg, dann geht es um ein paar deutsche Heldentaten, all das steht so zwar nicht im Buch, aber wen kümmert’s schon [...]” Furthermore, critics point out that the atrocities of the *Wehrmacht* are emphasized throughout the movie “damit schließlich niemand den Vorwurf erheben kann, Färberböck schreibe an einer deutschen Opfergeschichte, lässt der Regisseur seine Figuren immer mal wieder laut aussprechen, dass die deutsche Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion noch viel ärger gewütet hat als die Rote Armee in Berlin,” Christina Nord (2008) observed in the *taz*.

Even the predominantly laudatory reviews admonish the director for deviating from the diary, particularly for fabricating a sentimental love story between Anonyma and the Russian major. Andreas Kilb (“Kitsch und Vergewaltigung”) dubs it “Liebesschmonzette” an “deutsch-russisches Romeo und Julia in rauchenden Trümmern” and critiques that “von den verbotenen Küssen im Dämmerlicht über die Brautwerbung [...] bis zum Abschied im Morgengrauen [...] klappert er [Färberböck] alles ab, was den Konsalik-Verfilmungen der fünfziger Jahre lieb und teuer war.” While critics unanimously stress that Anonyma’s diary is a remarkable and extraordinary document, they argue that the film at large and particularly the transformation of the quasi-prostitutional liason of exchanging sex pseudo-voluntarily for food and protection from rape into a love story does injustice and trivializes the subject of sexual violence and coercion of women, According to Claudia Lenssen (2008) the film script seeks to circumvent the difficulty of representing the sexual violence of the Red Army without relativizing either the violence of the *Wehrmacht* or minimizing the role of women in the Nazi regime “indem es [das Drehbuch] Gefühle zwischen der Protagonistin und einem russischen Major konstruiert, deren Unmöglichkeit sie [Anonyma] im Buch beschreibt.”

The majority of the newspaper reviews are critical. While it seems that most of the positive reviewers who commend the movie had not read the book and were thus not able to compare these two different modes of representation, some consider it as having done the diary justice. Evelyn Finger (“Flieh”), for instance argued in the eminent *Die Zeit*, “dass der Film den Ton seiner Textvorlage trifft, ist vielleicht Färberböcks größte Leistung.” Positive responses, like those of Josef Lederle (2008) and Adrian Kreye (2008), characterize the movie as “ambitioniert” and even a “Geniestreich” respectively. But Marius Zekri (2008) even considers it “verfilmte Geschichte [...] einfühlsam erzählt, hervorragend besetzt und ohne Effekthascherei [...] lässt

Regisseur Max Färberböck die Schrecken der Nachkriegszeit auf der Leinwand lebendig werden” and regrets that “Filme dieser Art findet man im Kino leider viel zu selten.”

The positive reviews essentially praise all the points the negative ones criticize: the movie setting and music, the depiction of rape and violence and the representation of the Russian soldiers and the German women, and of course the love story between Anonyma and the Russian major. Christiane Peitz (2008), for instance, praises precisely the artificiality of the setting in *Tagesspiegel*: “Das Krude der Bilder, das im Trümmerstaub diffuse Kulissenhafte der mit Mobiliar und Kriegsgerät vermüllten Ruinenstadt – diese Unzulänglichkeiten sind wahrer als jede behauptete Authentizität. Wir können das nicht inszenieren, sagen die Bilder, es überfordert uns. Wir zeigen nur, was sich gerade noch zeigen lässt. Den Frauen zuliebe, ihrer Überlebensenergie und Schlagfertigkeit, mit der sie der eigenen Wehrlosigkeit trotzen.”

While most critics are appalled by the lack of terror in depicting the violence, some argue that the film did not depict the rapes out of respect. According to Christian Horn (2008) “immerhin kann man Regisseur Max Färberböck nicht vorwerfen, dass er die Vergewaltigungen als Schauwert missbraucht, inszeniert er doch die missbrauchten Frauen mit respektvoller Distanz.” And while negative reviews call *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* politically overcorrect, positive reviews appreciate the sensitive and careful handling of German victimhood in relation to crimes committed by Germans. According to Joachim Kurz (2008),

Max Färberböck [...] zeichnet ein weitgehend differenziertes Bild der Ereignisse: Die Frauen, die er zeigt, geraten ihm keineswegs nur zu Opfern, sondern auch zu Menschen, die sich ihrer eigenen Mitschuld an der Naziherrschaft bewusst sind. Und umgekehrt sind auch die russischen Soldaten keine Ungeheuer, sondern vor allem getrieben von dem

Wunsch nach Rache für das unermessliche Leid, dass deutsche Soldaten über die Sowjetunion gebracht haben. [...] Auch Nina Hoss als Anonyma ist durchaus eine zwiespältige Person: Bereits ihr einführender Off-Kommentar lässt kaum einen Zweifel daran, dass diese Frau sehr wohl eine Nutznießerin des Nazi Regimes war.

Reviewers also commend the director for casting Russian actors and for portraying the Russian soldiers as individuals. As Margret Köhler (2008) writes in her online review, “dem Film gelingt eine Gratwanderung, er zeigt Brutalität und Bestialität der Russen (ca. 2.000 russische Komparsen waren am Set), zeichnet sie aber nicht nur als unzivilisierte Masse aus Mördern und Schändern, sondern als Menschen in ihrer Erbärmlichkeit und Widersprüchlichkeit, die sich für das rächen, was ihnen die Deutschen angetan haben.” Jörg Brandes (2008) similarly argues that “Max Färberböck [...] schildert ausgiebig die von den Rotarmisten begangenen Gräueltaten (ohne jedoch bei den Vergewaltigungsszenen allzu drastisch zu werden), lässt dabei aber nie vergessen, wer den Krieg letztlich angezettelt hat. Darüber hinaus zeichnet er ein differenziertes Bild von Siegern und Besiegten. Die Russen zeigt er nicht bloß als gefühllose Berserker, sondern auch als durch ihre Kriegserfahrungen traumatisierte Männer.” However, Köhler, Brandes and reviewers like them not only support dubious pop psychological clichés, such as that aggression constitutes an acting out one’s own traumas, but they also reflect a dubious notion of ethics in considering revenge as a balancing of scores and an acceptable form of poetic justice. They essentially consider the mass rapes just punishment of the women for being Nazi followers and in lieu of punishment for the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* who committed comparable or worse crimes.

Some of the laudatory reviews even consider the transformation of the complex but nevertheless quasi-prostitutional liason between Anonyma and the Russian major one of the film's strengths. Thomas Engel (2008), for instance, notes on Programm kino.de that although the love story does not correspond to the original diary it is one of the strongest moments of the movie and convincingly developed by the scriptwriter: "Im Mittelpunkt beherrscht das diffizile, emotional komplizierte, glaubhaft herausgearbeitete Verhältnis zwischen der Anonyma und Andrej das Geschehen. Nina Hoss und Evgeny Sidikhin stellen das ausgezeichnet dar." However, even the majority of the commendable reviews criticizes the love story and argues that Färberböck should not have changed such an important detail. Joachim Kurz (2008), who writes that Färberböck "ein Händchen für historische Stoffe hat" and praises the director's sensitive portrayal of German women and Russian soldiers, argues: "Was dann allerdings doch gewaltig stört, ist die Betonung der Liebesgeschichte zwischen der aufrechten Journalistin und ihrem Beschützer, auf die es in den Aufzeichnungen der 'echten' Anonyma keinerlei Hinweis gibt. [...]" In einem Film, der sich um die Aufarbeitung eines Tabus von dieser Tragweite bemüht, wirkt das absolut fehl am Platz."

While aside from acknowledging the fact that the movie draws attention to the issue of systematic mass rape during wartime the reviewers agree on little else, the vast majority reject the sentimental and melodramatic love story which falsifies the actual relation between German women and Russian occupation soldiers and belittles the severity of rape and violence. The greatest difference in opinion among reviewers is with regard to the depiction of German women and Russian soldiers. The majority of reviewers criticize the depiction of German women as Nazi supporters and the too positive portrayal of the Russian soldiers, who, if anything, were only taking revenge for the equal if not worse crimes German soldiers had committed because it



diverged from the diary and trivialized the ubiquity and violence of the mass rapes. A notable minority of reviewers, however, argues that by not emphasizing German women as victims and by depicting the Russian soldiers as individuals the director avoids historical misrepresentation.

### *The Vernacular Reception in Viewer Responses*

To analyze the vernacular reception of the film, I had to rely solely on internet sources. I did contact Constantin Film asking for letters by viewers but was told that they did not receive any responses. I also contacted various newspapers with the same request but all responded that they do not archive letters from readers. Hence, I analyzed audience responses to online newspaper articles as well as posted on internet blogs and movie forums. The advantage of internet postings is that users can interact in virtual reality and engage in cyber discussions. I analyzed a total of 34 entries from four different websites.<sup>35</sup> Three entries consisted of only one or two words in reaction to other entries, five were neutral responses that only indicated that the respondent had seen the movie, two participants related their own experience of rape, nine reviewers commented negatively and five positively on the film.

While viewers address the same points as the newspaper reviews, they reflect less on the film's central love story between *Anonyma* and the major. Only two viewers mention it. Anna-Lena (2009) writes on amazon.de:

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<sup>35</sup> I used four different internet forums for this analysis: 1) reviews to the DVD *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* on amazon.de: [http://www.amazon.de/Anonyma-Eine-Berlin-Nina-Hoss/dp/B001ISKFSA/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&s=dvd&qid=1241468468&sr=8-2](http://www.amazon.de/Anonyma-Eine-Berlin-Nina-Hoss/dp/B001ISKFSA/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=dvd&qid=1241468468&sr=8-2) (accessed August 1, 2009); 2) the forum on kino-zeit.de: <http://www.kino-zeit.de/filme/anonyma-eine-frau-in-berlin> (accessed August 1, 2009); 3) the forum on filmstarts.de: <http://www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/74225-Anonyma-Eine-Frau-in-Berlin.html> (accessed August 1, 2009); 4) comments on a film review on schnittberichte.com: <http://www.schnittberichte.com/news.php?ID=1043> (accessed August 1, 2009).

Natürlich kann man ein Buch nicht Eins zu Eins wiedergeben als Film, aber einfach mal das ganze Buch umzuschreiben und zu behaupten, dass die Autorin Gefühle für ihren Beschützer entwickelt habe, finde ich unerhört. Auch diese eifersüchtige russische ‘Soldatin’ fand ich sehr unpassend, sodass der Film für mich persönlich schon fast in einen Liebesfilm mutierte ... Frau wird bedrängt bzw. ist in Not und ein ‘Held’ kommt und rettet sie und beide verlieben sich.

Viewers use similar adjectives as newspaper reviewers to describe the movie and calling it “langweilig” (Heiner Sikorski 2008), “feige” (Omar 2008), and “unglaublich” (Petra Bonhoff 2008) and unanimously admonish that the ubiquity and the extreme brutality of the mass rapes are unethically falsified. Brigitte Meisler (2008) describes the reality she experienced as follows:

Ich bin Zeitzeugin. Ich bin Jahrgang 1929 und habe, wenn auch nicht in Berlin, so doch aber in Königsberg diesen Schrecken mitgemacht. Der Regisseur verniedlicht diese Epoche [...] Kann sich der Regisseur oder auch diese farblose Hauptdarstellerin vorstellen, was es heißt, wenn in jedem Keller ums Überleben gekämpft wird? Unnatürliche Schreie von gequälten Menschen durch die Gewölbe hallen? Kann sich der Regisseur vorstellen, was es für eine Mutter bedeutet, wenn sie festgehalten wird und zusehen muss, wie ihre 8-jährige Tochter von 3 Soldaten missbraucht wird? Nachher fallen sie über diese Mutter her, die in den Momenten seelisch gestorben ist. Glaubt der Regisseur allen Ernstes, dass die Russen Parties mit uns gefeiert haben? Frauen wurden stundenlang missbraucht bis sie nur noch bluteten. Ihre Unterleiber wurden auch mit

Gegenständen zerstört. Kinder wurde auch gegen die Wand geschlagen und bestialisch getötet. Warum darf der Deutsche diese Trauer nicht zeigen. Wir haben die Hölle mitgemacht – es war kein Sauffest und die Soldaten verliebten sich nicht. In dieser Zeit gab es keine Liebe! Kann sich der Regisseur vorstellen, was es für die Kinder hieß, wenn ihre Mutter weggezerrt wurde? Die Kinder schrien! Dieser ganze Film ist eine einzigartige Verblödung! Über die zivilen Opfer sprechen – ja, ich bitte darum! Aber nicht in einer derartig primitiven und verhöhnenden Weise. Entmenschte Bestien fielen in die Keller ein und keine gutmütigen Männer. Mein Gott, wie hier die Menschen belogen werden.

Verena Toben (2008) similarly writes:

Ich habe das Buch gelesen und muss sagen, dass es in keinster Weise in diesem Film umgesetzt wurde. Die Grauen, die den Mädchen und Frauen angetan wurden, kommen hier nicht zum Ausdruck. Hier gewinnt man mehr den Eindruck, dass die russischen Soldaten einfach nur gutmütige Männer sind, die den Frauen helfen möchten [...] In diesem Film wird die Besetzung verherrlicht. Mein Gott, die Frauen lachten, tanzten, hatten zu Trinken und zu Essen [...] dieser Film ist eine Beleidigung für jene Mädchen und Frauen, die bei den Massenvergewaltigungen starben, die Mädchen und Frauen, die sich nachher das Leben nahmen, die Mädchen und Frauen, die niemals darüber sprechen durften, weil nach dem Krieg niemand darüber etwas hören wollte [...] Dieser Film ist für Gutmenschen von Gutmenschen und eine derartige geschichtliche Entstellung ist ja schon kriminell [...] Dieser Film ist ein Hohn!

Ulrich Janert (2008) argues that for most Germans the Soviet occupation meant horror, death and, fear at least for several months and that none of this is represented in the film which belittles the serious subject of the mass rapes:

Nein, diesen Film hätte man nicht drehen sollen. Ich meine damit nicht, dass das Thema verschwiegen werden sollte. Meines Erachtens nach ist aber irgendwo Schluss mit künstlerischer Freiheit ... Das Thema Massenvergewaltigungen nach dem 2. Weltkrieg ist so schwierig und bitterernst, dass es nicht als eine Art Seifenoper ins Kino gehört. Das wirklich sehr gute Buch wäre ausreichend gewesen, zumal ich nach dem Ende des Films das Gefühl hatte [...] aber eigentlich war es ja doch nicht so schlimm... Doch, es war noch viel, viel schlimmer und weit ausserhalb jeder Vorstellungskraft, als im Film gezeigt wurde und das ist m.E. nach das Problem des Films. DAS kann nun wirklich nicht gezeigt werden und damit verniedlicht der Film die Gräuelp des Krieges.

Since the ubiquity and brutality of the crimes committed by the Soviet army are omitted from the film, the soldiers who engaged in systematic mass rapes are, in violation to historical reality, represented as “im Grunde gutmütige Sonnyboys [...] die lieber Parties feierten, sangen und tanzten.” as Heiner Sikorski (2008) wrote. Ulrich Gerlach (2008) similarly admonished that “die Russen als gutmütige ‘Befreier’ zu zeigen, ist gelinde gesagt, Volksverdummung. Sie hassten die Deutschen, die seinerzeit ihr Land überfallen haben. Sie kannten kein Pardon.” While he grants that “natürlich kann man das ganze Ausmaß und Elend nicht filmisch umsetzen,” in fact, ”grausige Szenen würden auch mehr pervertierte Gemüter ins Kino locken, die gerne sehen,

wenn eine Frau vergewaltigt wird,” he argues that “man kann vieles subtil einbinden – der Zuschauer denkt in der Regel mit.” Viewers perceptively admonish that the overtly politically correct but in its falsification of past reality deeply unethical film reflects none of the actual brutalities and minimizes the extent of the mass rapes.

The smaller number of positive reviews by viewers describe the movie as “sehenswert” (Frank Ernst 2008) and “perfekt inszeniert” (moechtegern 2008), and praise the points that negative responses criticize. For instance a user named BBSS (2008) appreciates “dass die eindringliche Darstellung dieses Themas auch ohne grafisch zu explizite Vergewaltigungsszenen gelungen ist.” Viewers furthermore assess the differentiated depiction of the Russian soldiers as laudatory. hansalberts (2008) thus writes:

Die russischen Männer sind sehr differenziert in diesem Film dargestellt. Ein melancholischer, korrekter Major mit Herz und Mut, ein Hallodri Oberleutnant, verschiedene namenlose Mannschaften, die morodierend durch die Häuser ziehen. Max Färberböck versucht eine umfassende Wahrheit aufzuzeigen: die Wut der Russen, ihre Erfahrung mit den Schrecken des Krieges durch die Deutschen (die ihn begonnen haben), die Lebensfreude, aber auch die Brutalität und Geilheit, Gewaltätigkeit, auch Unschuldige werden einfach abgeknallt.

Frank Ernst (2008), similarly writes, “gut wurde auch die Rote Armee dargestellt. Von schöngestigen, Puschkin rezitierenden Führungsoffizieren über gut aussehende Machos bis zu verrohten Kämpfern jenseits des Urals,” although he admits that the latter “in der Realität, im Gegensatz zum Film sicher in der Überzahl waren.”

Some audience members considered the film as acknowledging the terrible suffering of the women adequately, e.g., BBSS (2008) writes, “was diese Frauen ertragen mussten ist nicht in Worte zu fassen. Der Film ist meines Erachtens ein wichtiger Beitrag um solche ‘Vorkommnisse’ nicht vergessen werden zu lassen. Schlimm, dass es so etwas wohl immer geben wird.” Frank Ernst (2008), who even appreciates the melodramatic love story, summarizes his positive reception of the film as follows:

Es ist nicht der übliche Betroffenheitsfilm der leidenden Deutschen (wie z.B. Vilsmayers *Stalingrad*) [...]. Der Film lebt vor allem von der bizarren Situation, dass die brillierende Hauptdarstellerin Nina Hoß [sic], zuerst nur überleben will, sich dann Sympathie und so eine Art Liebe zu Ihren Feinden (in Person, des russischen Kommandeurs) entwickelt. Nebenhandlungen wie die Eifersucht der russischen Soldatin auf die Protagonisten und das verständlicher Weise totale Nichtverstehen der wenig übergebliebenen Ehemänner verwirkt der Film auf eindrucksvolle Weise [...] Alles in allem wurde ein sehenswerter Film über ein 60 Jahre langes Tabuthema gedreht. Der Film spricht das Leid welches dieser Krieg den beiden Völkern gebracht hat in einer emotional aufwühlender Art an und zeigt uns viel besser als z. B. *Der Untergang* die Auswirkung.

Most of the official and vernacular reviews uncritically praised the diary for its honesty and self-reflective approach that does not simplify the subject of civilian German victimhood at large and the mass rapes in particular via the good-versus-evil plot of melodrama but criticized the film adaptation for precisely that. While both official and vernacular reviews of the diary are predominantly laudatory, film reviews by critics and regular viewers are largely critical. The

most significant difference between the official and the vernacular reception of the film is that the newspaper reviewers are more concerned with the film's aesthetics, particularly the melodramatic love story, whereas ordinary viewers scathe the movie for unethically belittling the ubiquity and the violence of the mass rapes. It is difficult to say whether official and vernacular reviewers came to the same conclusions independently or whether the official reviews influenced the reception of the regular audiences.

Two newspapers – the *Bild am Sonntag* and the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* – called on contemporary witnesses to tell their own stories about the occupation period after the war. The *Bild am Sonntag* printed some of the letters in their November 2, 2008 edition. The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* from October 22, 2008 likewise invited women to call or write a letter about their own experience, asking readers “Reden Sie mit Redakteurin Ute Schwarzwald über Ihre schlimme Erfahrung.” The letters and recorded phone calls were printed in the October 29 and November 1, 2008 editions. In both papers, letters and phone call summaries were printed without comments apart from the note that both papers received a huge response which indicates that the need to talk about these experiences is still very strong.

*Official and Vernacular Reception in the Context of the Opferdebatte*

Newspaper articles about *Anonyma - Eine Frau in Berlin* also refer to other contemporary German films and note a new trend in German cinema. As Christian Horn (2008) from filmstarts.de puts it, “in den vergangenen Jahren überzeugten Filme wie *Der Untergang*, *Sophie Scholl* und *Das Leben der Anderen* an den heimischen Kinokassen und stießen zugleich auf internationale Beachtung. Ganz klar: Filme mit geschichtlichem Hintergrund dominieren das deutsche Hochglanzkino klar.” While merging films about the Third Reich and the GDR seems questionable, some critics notice furthermore that the subject of German civilian victimhood is particularly ubiquitous in both mainstream German cinema and television. While reviewers observe the omnipresence of German victimhood in the media, particularly the bombing of Dresden, flight and expulsion, and with the film adaptation of *Anonyma*’s diary also the mass rapes, they do not analyze the trend in detail. Critics focus on the argument that the reason for the taboo was that Germans were afraid to turn bystanders, followers and even perpetrators into victims. Oliver Reinhard (2008), for instance, argues that “seit einigen Jahren scheint er endgültig gebrochen, der Bann, der deutsche Opferschaft aus der Literatur und dem Kino über den Zweiten Weltkrieg weitgehend heraushielt und den Blick zurück in die Geschichte ebenso weitgehend auf Täter und Täterschaft richtete. Sein Motiv war klar und verständlich: Angst vor Relativierung, vor einer Sicht auf die Deutschen als mehrheitlich unschuldige Lämmer.” Reinhard stipulates that “die zahlreichen Bücher und Filme über auch deutsches Leid, die seit der Jahrtausendwende erschienen” will not significantly alter the collective German “Urteil über das Gewesene.” However, neither he nor other reviewers explain why the taboo of German victimhood changed recently, how this transition in official German memory interacts with unification or how it will effect the future German understanding of the Third Reich. Christina



Nord's (2008) review in the *taz* is one of the few reviewers who provides a more detailed and contextualized critique of the film, which is thus worth quoting here at length:

Filme wie *Der Untergang*, *Napola*, *Das Wunder von Bern* oder, kürzlich erst, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex* [...] finden [...] [nicht nur] in der Geschichte einen unerschöpflichen Fundus an Geschichten, sie verschieben auch nachhaltig unsere Wahrnehmung von Geschichte. Diese Filme haben eines gemein: Sie verblüffen durch ihre Naivität und ihre Konzeptlosigkeit. Während sich die Regisseure des Neuen Deutschen Films in den 70er-Jahren viele Gedanken machten, wie man den Nationalsozialismus überhaupt ins Bild setzen kann, ohne dessen visuelle Selbstinszenierung, dessen Verführungskünste zu wiederholen, hält zum Beispiel Dennis Gansels *Napola* so viele rot leuchtende Hakenkreuzfahnen vor die Kamera, dass man hinterher gern die Sehnerven entnazifizieren ließe. Wenn es überhaupt so etwas wie ein Programm gibt, dann drückt es sich in der Fetischisierung von Authentizität aus. 'So ist es gewesen' lautet das Mantra [...] Das Ergebnis sind merkwürdige Filme. Im Fall von *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* fließt Vieles und Widersprüchliches zusammen, ohne dass sich ein kohärenter Wurf daraus ergäbe. [...] Verblüffend ist vielmehr, mit wie wenig Haltung, wie wenig ästhetischer Durchdringung, wie wenig Reflexion sie [producers like Bernd Eichinger and Günther Rohrbach] durchkommen – und wie leicht sie die von ihnen beanspruchte visuelle Deutungsmacht in den Medien und an den Kinokassen durchsetzen können. Offenbar kommen ihre Filme, indem sie die widerspenstigen, schmerzhaften Stoffe in schlichten Erzählformaten stillstellen, dem Bedürfnis nach dem viel zitierten unverkrampften Umgang mit der deutschen Geschichte

entgegen; offenbar hat gerade die Naivität etwas Verführerisches in einer Zeit, in der man sich wieder gerne positiv und ohne Scham auf Deutschland bezieht.

Although most reviewers comment on the *Opferdebatte* only in passing, they tend to critique many of the recent German films about the Third Reich for their simplistic treatment of the past. And while particularly in the film adaptation of Anonyma's diary and some of the official reviews the notion of balancing the score for *Wehrmacht* and *SS* crimes is present, none of the films or their official and vernacular reviews revived the 1950s West German notion that the six million Germans, who died in bombing raids, during flight and expulsion, as a consequence of mass rapes, and as soldiers, balance the score with the six million victims of the Holocaust. Even those reviews who welcome the depiction of Germans as victims in movies and other media artifacts write that Germans were perpetrators, followers and bystanders first and that the acknowledgement of large-scale German victimhood, while necessary for a historically and ethically responsible commemoration of the Third Reich, will not minimize collective German guilt and responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism. Sven Felix Kellerhoff ("Hier nix Frau"), for instance, argues that

unabhängig von der Qualität von Färberböcks Verfilmung und von allem Streit um die Authentizität des Buches im Detail bleibt: Nach mehr als sechzig Jahren wird endlich die Erfahrung massenhafter sexueller Gewalt am Ende von Hitlers Krieg im Bewusstsein verankert. Das ist richtig. Denn nur wenn man die ganze Geschichte sieht, die Toten des deutschen Expansions- und Rassenwahns ebenso wie die deutschen Opfer von

Bombenkrieg, Flucht und Vertreibung sowie Besatzung, wird glaubwürdige Erinnerung möglich.

While the *Opferdebatte* is only reflected on in passing in the reviews of regular viewers, they do mention German civilians as victims of World War II in their postings on the film adaptation of Anonyma's diary. Two reviewers Brigitte Meisler (2008) and Ulrich Gerlach (2008) contextualize the notion of German followers and bystanders by arguing that the idea of collective German guilt neglects that the Third Reich constituted a dictatorship. Both Meisler and Gerlach welcome that German civilian victims are acknowledged in film and TV but criticize that *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* minimizes the extent and the brutality of the mass rapes and even casts them as just punishment. It is precisely this ethically most objectionable argument of the film that Ulrich Janert (2008) took even further. He argued that “der von den Deutschen begonnene Krieg kostete 27 Millionen russischen Bürgern das Leben, von 5 Millionen Kriegsgefangenen wurden 4 Millionen erschlagen, erschossen, verhungerten” and therefore “besser wär es gewesen, diesen Film nicht zu drehen.” In other words, because *Wehrmacht* and SS murdered unimaginably vast numbers of Soviet citizens in the Second World War, the fact that Soviet soldiers also engaged in mass murder, rape and pillage of German civilians ought to be eliminated from the historical record because its scale pales in comparison. The reflections on the film in the context of the *Opferdebatte* by a user named Georg (2008), posted to the website of Germany's most leftwing newspaper *taz*, while provocative, are the most differentiated and ethically most responsible:

Das eine Verbrechen entschuldigt nicht ein anderes. Besonders Alt68er haben verständlicherweise eine Scheu vor öffentlichen Diskussionen über solche Themen, die von Rechtsradikalen missbraucht werden könnten. Grundsätzlich gilt: Jedes Opfer hat ein Recht mit der erlittenen Tat in der Öffentlichkeit erwähnt zu werden. Dieses Thema war jahrzehntelange tabuisiert worden, was die Schlagzeilen und vorderen Seiten in den Medien angeht. Nur relativ versteckt wurde hin und wieder am Rande erwähnt, dass da doch irgendetwas geschah. Allenfalls die Vertriebenenverbände verwiesen auf unschuldige Frauen, die als Individuen nicht als Strafobjekte für die gesamten Naziverbrechen herhalten sollten. Schuld, Unschuld und Strafe muss immer auf den jeweiligen Einzelfall, Täter und das Opfer bezogen werden. Es darf niemals kollektiv Menschen zugeschrieben werden.

*Online Viewer Discussions of the Film*

Newspaper articles that are published online can ignite interesting discussions because registered users can respond to both the articles themselves and/or other comments. The two discussions of the film I analyze comment not only on the movie itself but on the users' debate more generally as to how to deal with Germany's past and about the problematic relationship between Russians and Germans. Each of the discussions was ignited by a particular article. The first, Sylvia Parton's "Frauen als Beute – Verschwiegene Schicksale," published in the *Schweriner Volkszeitung* on October 20, 2008 gives a rather unbiased summary of Anonyma's diary and the movie.<sup>36</sup> The article is not primarily a book or film review but rather provides contextualizing information, for instance, that it is estimated that two million women were raped

<sup>36</sup> See article and comments: <http://www.svz.de/mecklenburg-vorpommern/artikeldetail/article/529/frauen-als-beute-verschwiegene-schicksale.html> (accessed August 1, 2009).

by Soviet soldiers and that the organization ‘medica mondiale’ is organizing a research study in cooperation with psychiatrists from the university Greifswald that will explore the long term effects of these rapes. Parton refers to German guilt only in passing (“Weil die eigene Schuld der Deutschen es erschwerte, sich als Opfer zu sehen”) and shortly alludes to a Russian soldier who tells how German soldiers raped and killed his family. It was not the article itself but the first comment by Heike Hrig<sup>37</sup> (2008) that generated the controversy. Hrig writes:

Soso - es gab also sowjetische Soldaten, die Verbrechen begingen. – Frage: Wie benahmen sich die Soldaten des Hitler-Regimes in Osteuropa? Wieviel Leid und Unrecht hat die deutsche Soldateska verbreitet? Wieviele Sinti- und Roma-Frauen, Polinnen, russische Frauen usw wurden Opfer der Wehrmachtsoldaten, als sie in ihre Städte und Dörfer einfielen und sich der dortigen Frauen bemächtigten, um ihre sexuellen Gelüste zu befriedigen. Das entschuldigt zwar nicht Übergriffe von Angehörigen der Roten Armee, als sie Deutschland befreiten, aber bei geschichtlichen Betrachtungen sollte man nie vergessen nach den Ursachen zu fragen. Und die sind doch wohl eindeutig die, dass Deutschland selbst dies ausgelöst hat. Der Zweite Weltkrieg ging eindeutig von Deutschland aus. Deutschland überfiel die anderen Staaten und verbreitete dort Angst und Schrecken und ihre Methode war das Zurücklassen verbrannter Erde, als es dem Ende entgegenging. Sie haben in Osteuropa, insbesondere in der Sowjetunion, unsagbares Leid zurückgelassen - Dies darf man nicht vergessen und sollte man in diesem Zusammenhang anmerken und nicht die Angehörigen der Roten Armee, denen wir die Befreiung zu verdanken haben, derartig einseitig diffarmieren [sic]. Wenn die Uni

<sup>37</sup> Internet users get user names in order to stay anonymous. These names sometimes ignore spelling and upper/lower case rules and other regulations. In this dissertation, I quote the original usernames as found on the respective Internet forums.

Greifswald Geschichtsaufarbeitung betreibt, so ist dies löblich. Allerdings darf diese Geschichtsaufarbeitung nicht einseitig darauf hinauslaufen, hier nur die ach so böse Rote Armee zu diffarmieren [sic], sondern objektiv auch mal betrachten, was diese Soldaten der Befreiungstruppen selber für psychologische Ursachen hatten für ihr Handeln und dann schauen woher diese kamen - dann landet man sehr schnell bei den wahren Schuldigen und Verbrecher: Hitler-Deutschland!

Heike Hrig's comment, which takes up the film's dubious notion that not only did the Soviet soldiers solely act motivated by revenge but that this is ethically acceptable because the crimes German soldiers committed were worse, engendered a long discussion with numerous participants. Most of the discussants disagreed with her, 23 out of 27 responses, several of them vehemently. Heike Hrig however never responded to any of the criticism. Most respondents reject Hrig's claim that the raped women are essentially to be blamed for their victimization because they were, Hrig presumes, Nazi supporters. Respondents who disagree with Hrig, nevertheless, emphasize that Germany is indeed responsible for the war and for the mass murder of millions, and that many German soldiers committed war crimes and that it is important never to forget this. They do not accept, however, that this should preempt the discussion and commemoration of German civilian victims and argue that one crime does not justify another crime. The discussants reject the notion that the raped German women can be considered to have received just punishment for their support of the Nazi regime and that the mass rapes balance score of atrocities. A respondent named A. BERNDT (2008), for instance, writes:

In besagten Artikel geht es nicht um [...] Geschichtsfälschung, sondern eher darum, mit dem Mythos des heldenhaften, ehrenvollen, sowjetischen Befreiers ins Gericht zu gehen. Es ist unbestritten, dass die deutsche Wehrmacht und die anderen „Organe“ der NS-Zeit in den besetzten Gebieten grauenvolle Dinge veranstaltet haben – das wird ja auch in dem Artikel mit der Bemerkung eines sowjetischen Soldaten zitiert. Allerdings sollte auch gesagt werden dürfen, dass sich eben die sowjetischen Befreier auch nicht gerade heldenhaft gegenüber den Befreiten (oder doch eher Besiegten?) verhalten haben. Sie haben sich für die Taten der Deutschen an ihrem Landsleuten gerächt, frei nach dem biblischen Motto „Auge um Auge“. Auf der einen Seite verständlich, deswegen aber immer noch abscheulich!

Some responses react emotionally. While Grosser (2008) writes, “klasse Einstellung. Wenn ein Land ein Krieg anfängt, dürfen dessen Kinder und Frauen missbraucht werden. Sie tun mir leid!!!” (n.pag.), the reaction of K.P. (2008) dubiously argues that “einigen passt es wohl nicht das auch deutsche frauen opfer [sic] sind. die schuldkeule [sic] hab ich satt, verdammt!” Several of the respondents note that Hrig’s comment employs the GDR discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, wherein the Red Army prominently and solely functioned as heroes who liberated Germany from Fascism. A commentator with the username JAN NYPURLOVE (2008) even hyposthesizes Hrigs entire GDR biography:

Hallo Frau Hrig, ich kenne Sie leider nicht. Schade, denn ich würde Sie gerne einmal zu einem Gespräch einladen, um zu erfahren, wie Sie zu so einer Meinung kommen. Aber vielleicht hilft mir meine Menschenkenntnis: Sie wurden nie vergewaltigt. Sie fanden und

finden die Zeit der DDR klasse, weil alle soooo solidarisch waren.Sie glauben, die Sowjets waren gute Freunde und haben die Menschen in der DDR vor den bösen Kapitalisten beschützt. Sie waren am 1. Mai immer dabei und haben echt geglaubt: Von den Sowjets lernen heißt siegen lernen. Sie müssen nicht hungern, sind ganz gut versorgt. Sie meckern über den Staat, die Politik, die Gesellschaft. Sie haben (wenn Sie Schwerinerin sind) Frau Gramkow [Angelika Gramkov of *Die Linke* is the mayor of Schwerin] gewählt. Wenn Sie sich in diesen Beschreibungen wiederfinden, dann steht fest: Sie bzw. Ihre Meinung ist Geschichtsverfälschung!!!! Wenn die Beschreibungen nicht zutreffen, dann ist es um so wichtiger zu erfahren, wie Sie zu so einer Meinung kommen.

Virtually all commentators agree that German collective memory should include both guilt and responsibility for the crimes committed by Germans but also German civilian victims, a notion many of them emphasized vehemently.

The second article that generated a sizable online discussion was Eckhard Fuhr's "Von der Nazi-Anhängerin zum Opfer der Russen," an interview with Nina Hoss about her playing the part of Anonyma, which was published in *Die Welt* on October 17, 2008.<sup>38</sup> In the interview, Fuhr asks Hoss if she sees Anonyma as an innocent victim, which Hoss emphatically rejects. She argues not only that Anonyma is an ambivalent character but, in sync with the movie script that the Russian soldiers solely took revenge for what German soldiers did. The responses to the article expand on the interview and reflect on core questions of the *Opferdebatte*: Can Germans collectively and/or individually be regarded as victims although they were perpetrators,

<sup>38</sup> See article and comments: <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article2590855/Von-der-Nazi-Anhaengerin-zum-Opfer-der-Russen.htm> (accessed August 1, 2009).



followers, and bystanders first? Were the mass rapes a just punishment for comparable, if not worse, German crimes? Should Germans remember the Red Army as liberators or as brutal rapists? Twelve users argue that German women should not be considered victims and/or strongly emphasized the role of Germans as perpetrators. Twelve other users state contrarily that German women should be regarded as victims, highlighting that rape is a crime regardless why it was committed or who committed the crime. They furthermore argue that every victim should be acknowledged and that no crime can excuse another crime. Pierre Galois (2008), for instance, writes that the notion that German soldiers committed crimes, too, is unethical:

Interessant wie bei manchen das Gerechtigkeitsbewusstsein verloren geht, wenn eine Ideologie dahinter steckt. Beispiel: betrachtet man den Fall einer Vergewaltigung isoliert, wird wohl jeder sagen, dass dies ein abscheuliches Verbrechen ist. Betrachtet man die Vergewaltigungen im Osten nach dem WK II, wird das ganze relativiert 'die Nazis haben ja auch 10 Mio. Russen umgebracht' etc. Plötzlich ist das Verbrechen 'Vergewaltigung' legitim. Tausende von Kindern und Frauen zu töten, wird wohl auch jeder als abscheuliches Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit bezeichnen. Die Bombardierung von Dresden 1945 wird dann allerdings als notwendiges Übel titulierte, da ja der Krieg beendet werden muss [...] Mein Punkt ist, dass Blickwinkel und Ideologie viele zu menschenverachtenden Relativierungen verleiten. Betrachtet ein Verbrechen als Verbrechen. So wie es ist. Isoliert, ohne Rechtfertigung und ohne wenn und aber. Einfach nur die Abscheulichkeit und versucht nicht irgendwelche Rechtfertigungen für das Verhalten der Täter zu finden, sondern das Leid der Opfer zu respektieren.

A commentator with the username GS (2008) argues more polemically:

Es ist das Übliche: Wenn mal die Deutschen als Opfer der Verbrechen der Anderen gezeigt werden (was selten genug vorkommt) muß sofort die volkspädagogische Keule geschwungen werden. Den Deutschen muß sofort klar gemacht werden, daß sie ja einem „Tätervolk“ angehören, daß unsägliches Leid über die anderen Völker gebracht hat. Die anderen haben natürlich in ihrer berechtigten Wut immer nur Rache geübt. Ich frage mich, wie lange man diese verlogene Schwarz-Weiß-Malerei noch aufrecht erhalten kann! Ein Verbrechen bleibt ein Verbrechen, auch wenn es von den Siegern begangen worden ist! Unsere Großmütter und Großväter, die zur damaligen Zeit gelebt haben, waren in ihrer überwältigenden Mehrheit keine Verbrecher, genauso wie die Anderen nicht alle Lichtgestalten gewesen sind! Es ist infam und verlogen, wenn immer nur die Deutschen als Verbrechervolk diskriminiert werden, während die anderen als Sieger sofort von jeder Schuld freigesprochen werden!

The opposing view is represented equally polemically. dozor (2008), for instance, writes:

Die Deutschen haben den Russen 20000000 Tote gebracht. In deinen Augen war das wohl eine humanitäre Aktion? Sind ja halt Barbaren, haben das Leben nicht verdient, mussten von ihrem Leid erlöst werden, oder? Welche Erklärung hast du für die 6000000 tote Juden, die Gaskammern und die Konzentrationslager? Die PISA Studie spiegelt eindeutig das geistige Niveau des Landes. In 50 Jahren wird in den Geschichtsbüchern womöglich stehen, dass die Russen, '41 Deutschland überfallen haben.

The discussion thus reflects the two antithetical notions that mark collective German memory of the Third Reich today: Some commentators welcome that Germans civilian victims are finally acknowledged and state that Soviet soldiers should not be onesidedly celebrated as liberators but also be held accountable for the crimes they committed during the occupation. It needs to be stressed that those who argue for the significance of including German civilians as victims in collective German memory neither deny the crimes committed in the Third Reich nor argue that the German victims balance the score with the victims of German crimes. The contrary view rejects any claim of German victimhood by vehemently emphasizing that Germans were a perpetrator nation which makes claiming victim status impossible.

#### *The Film in the Classroom*

How teachers incorporate *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* into the classroom influences how students evaluate the notion of Germans as victims of World War II. The classroom is an essential realm wherein young Germans participate in creating a national memory since it provides formal education about the Third Reich which has an impact on how students remember the past. Therefore, I will conclude this analysis of *Anonyma's* diary, its film adaptation and their respective official and vernacular reception with a discussion of teaching materials for the diary and/or the movie. For young Germans, popular literature, cinema and television programs constitute the most important source of historical information generally and about the Third Reich in particular and thus both reflect and reinforce collective German memory. The mass media are conduits between the intellectual elite and the mainstream national public. They echo the current zeitgeist and translate current intellectual discourses into widely consumed entertainment commodities (Kansteiner 2006). Therefore, it is important that formal education

enables students to be critical mass media consumers. Teaching materials not only or even primarily provide core insights into the construction of national memory because they reflect their author's notion of a particular subject matter but also and especially because they outline how teachers should discuss a particular subject which has a potentially vast impact on how students perceive the German past.

The teaching materials reflect that Anonyma's diary and the movie adaptation can be used in various school subjects, such as, history, ethics, civics, and German, and generate a number of possible topics for discussion, including the analysis of the diary genre, gender roles and power, rape in general and in wars, and of course the Second World War and the *Opferdebatte*. The following analysis of teaching materials will concentrate on the latter. All available materials are freely available on the internet. Since the first booklet, which was published by Vera Conrad and created by Regine Wenger and Rolf Thiessen, is provided at [www.anonyma.film.de](http://www.anonyma.film.de), it primarily didacticizes the movie. The fact that several teachers refer to these materials, which not only consist of didactic meta-discourse but also of worksheets ready to be copied and used in class, on their own course websites, indicates that the materials are indeed employed in current German classrooms. However, there are no comments or critiques available of how teachers employed the materials. The following reflections thus remain in the realm of textual analysis of the potential for shaping collective memory represented in the materials but not on whether and how this potential is actualized in specific classrooms.

Conrad and Wenger's booklet starts with a short plot summary and basic information about the diary. It is followed by comments of producer Günther Rohrbach and director Max Färberböck. Rohrbach notes that the mass rapes of German women were a taboo topic in postwar Germany because of Germany's status as a *Täternation* and "erst in letzter Zeit hat man, nicht

ohne kritische Begleitgeräusche, damit begonnen, in diesem oder jenem Falle eine andere Perspektive zuzulassen” (6). Rohrbach emphasizes that the film approaches the subject of civilian German victims “auf komplexe und ungewöhnliche Weise. Er erzählt keine typische Opfergeschichte. Er verschweigt nicht, wer in diesem Krieg die Angreifer, wer die Täter und damit die Verursacher waren. Es ist kein Film über ‘arme deutsche Frauen’ und ‘böse russische Soldaten’” (7). Furthermore, he states that

wir haben uns auch bemüht, die russischen Soldaten als Menschen darzustellen. Sie waren zum großen Teil einfache Bauern, denen man dieses reiche Deutschland als Beute versprochen hat, als Ausgleich für erlittenes Leid. Kein anderes Volk hat auch nur annähernd so viele Opfer gebracht. Von den über 50 Millionen Toten des Zweiten Weltkriegs waren mehr als die Hälfte Bürger der Sowjetunion. (8)

Färberböck also comments on the representation of the Soviet soldiers:

Und dann die Russen. Die Bestien. Die meisten von ihnen wurden von ihrer eigenen Führung zerschunden, viele von ihnen ins Feuer geschickt. Viele waren überzeugte Sowjets, andere Mörder und Schänder. Man schätzt die Toten auf sowjetischer Seite auf ca. 26 Millionen. Mindestens die Hälfte davon waren Zivilisten. Alte, Frauen, Kinder. Wer bis Berlin kam, hatte Brand und Tod und unendlich viel Blut gesehen. Wer bis Berlin kam, war zum Äußerten fähig. Alle? Ganz sicher nicht. Unser Urteil über die Brutalität der Russen sitzt fest. Auch heute noch. Warum sich also damit anlegen? Weil die Widersprüche in der Roten Armee enorm waren und weil nicht hunderttausende

Soldaten Schänder und Mörder waren. Um sie, die nicht dazu gehörten, besser zu verstehen, habe ich die erste Fassung des Drehbuches aus russischer Perspektive geschrieben. (10)

In the introductory remarks, Rohrbach and Färberböck thus explain how they attempted to avoid putting too much emphasis on German victimhood and that it was important for them to highlight that Nazi Germany is responsible for the war and the vast majority of crimes. While they are right in emphasizing that it is important to take into account the historical circumstances when talking about German civilian victims, the inclusion of their views, particularly in the opening section, not only reflects the traditional notion of the author's primary interpretive authority of his/her creation but also and especially reinforces rather than questions the ethically dubious message of the film of minimizing Russian crimes and considering them a balancing of the atrocity score. The introduction to the booklet is missing a critical contextualization of the film in the discursive history of the *Opferdebatte*.

After some contextualizing historical information on the occupation of Berlin in 1945, the teaching handbook offers various primary sources to complement the discussion of the film, including an excerpt, entitled "Ein Tagebuch aus männlicher russischer Sicht," from Wladimir Gelfand's *Deutschland-Tagebuch 1945–1946. Aufzeichnungen eines Rotarmisten*. Gelfand was a Russian soldier who experienced the occupation in Berlin firsthand and his was the first diary by a Russian soldier published in German. In the diary, which was published in 2005, he writes that during the occupation of Berlin he had many girlfriends but that he has never raped a woman. The information about Wladimir Gelfand and the excerpts from his book depict a cultivated, friendly and intellectual man, rather reminiscent of the film's idealized depiction of Anonyma's

protector. Gelfand does admit that Russian soldiers had raped girls and women and that he was offered sexual favors in return for protection, which he did not accept as this violated his code of honor as a soldier. While he tells honestly about the crimes which had been committed by his comrades, like the film, Gelfand's diary misrepresents the extent and extreme brutality of the mass rapes. Critically thinking teachers may incite their students to question the relationship between Gelfand and his many 'girlfriends' as probably at minimum also involving barter of sex for food, alcohol, and cigarettes, the latter of which functioned as a currency of sorts on the black market which enabled the women to survive and was thus far less voluntary than Gelfert may like to think. However, such a critical perspective is not included in the teaching materials, where Gelfert's diary rather seems to function to support the historical accuracy of the representation of Anonyma's cultivated protector in the film.

The following section, entitled "Opferfeindliche Sprache," summarizes aspects of Monika Gerstendörfer's book *Der verlorene Kampf um die Wörter. Opferfeindliche Sprache bei sexualisierter Gewalt. Ein Plädoyer für eine angemessene Sprachführung* (2007). Gerstendörfer's book explains how uncritical use of speech trivializes sexual violence and, hence, victimizes the victims a second time. She also mentions in passing that not only Russian soldiers raped German women, but that sexual violence was a common phenomenon in the American, British and French occupation zones, too. The intended use of this section in class is not immediately apparent. A teacher critical of the film may employ the summary of Gerstendörfer's book to critique the film as engaging in precisely such re-victimizing representations by trivializing the extent and brutality of the mass rapes. However, such an interpretation requires significant independent thinking of the teacher and is probably not the intended use of the booklets section, which may simply have been intended to provide an

opportunity of expanding class discussion to the subject of rape in general and to language use in representing taboo subjects.

The next section is called “Überlebensstrategien” and gives information on rape in wartime in general and points out that sexual violence against women is employed in every war. It also mentions that the UN Security Council declared sexual violence as a weapon of war in June 2008. However, the information provided about the systematic use of mass rape in wars is insufficient and the booklet lacks accounts from contemporary witnesses of the rapes in former Yugoslavia. Given its relative temporal and geographic proximity to Germany, such accounts would emphasize that sexual violence is still ubiquitous today and is so even close to home. A significant point of criticism is that none of the supplementary reading materials have been didacticized and are unrelated to the following didactic sections.

Subsequently, the booklet provides some teaching ideas and gives suggestions in what classes the material could be used. The authors suggest that the film be employed in grades ten and up and list the following topics and school subjects 1) history: the end of the War and the Russian occupation; 2) German: discussion of a biographical [sic] text; 3) Philosophy/Ethics: violence, aggression and gender.

The first didactic suggestion is an exercise in preparation of watching which serves “den Kinobesuch vor[zu]bereiten.” Students read the first 50 pages of Anonyma’s diary, which depicts life at the end of the war. This also serves the goal of “einen unbekanntem Text als historische Literaturquelle erfassen, Arbeitstechniken einüben wie z. B. Gedankengänge zusammenfassen oder wichtige Textstellen anführen, das Tagebuch als sprachliches Mittel erkennen und bewerten, Inhalt historisch in die letzten Kriegstage des 2. Weltkrieges und die Befreiung Berlins durch die sowjetische Armee einbetten” (19). Students are furthermore asked to prepare a



presentation in which they describe how they imagine everyday life in spring 1945 which incorporates pictures and music.

The next section provides an exercise that serves “den Kinobesuch nachbereiten” and concentrates on filmic interpretation. Students are asked to look at some still images from the film, to be chosen by the teacher, and analyze camera angle and perspective, mood and symbols. Finally, students compare the movie scene and the corresponding section in the diary. For the following exercise, “Überlebensstrategien in einer Extremsituation,” students are divided into two gender-based groups who each create internet blogs, in which they discuss what survival strategies woman and men employ in extreme situations like war. The last teaching unit “Taboos,” reflects on the fact that Anonyma published her diary anonymously since the rapes at the end of the war constituted a taboo in Germany. This section expands beyond the film to the general subject of the social role of taboos. Students are asked to propose and discuss one existing taboo that should be broken and another one that should not be broken. While this discussion goes significantly beyond the scope of film and diary, it may contribute to an understanding of core ethical questions and the social role of discourse. However, the discussion is to be incited by the following excerpt from a provocative interview with Ferdinand von Schirach called “Hitler im Überraschungsei,” originally published by the *Berliner Morgenpost* on Juli 28, 2008:

Die Profanisierung ist problematisch [...] In Unterhaltungssendungen bespucken Kinder ihre Eltern, und Buchhalter beschreiben ihre Gefühle, während sie sich vor laufender Kamera von einer Domina auspeitschen lassen. Die christliche Kirche ist auf die Frage reduziert, wie sie zu dem Gebrauch von Kondomen steht und im Abendprogramm kann

man sich vor dem Fettabsaugen an einer Schauspielerin grausen. Nur über das Dritte Reich und den Holocaust gibt es keine Witze. Es ist das letzte Ernsthafte, das letzte Tabu, das letzte Unantastbare in unserer Gesellschaft. Alle anderen Dinge wurden profan [...] Diese letzte Grenze zu überschreiten war bisher frevelhaft. Die Sühne für diesen Frevel war der Ausschluss aus unserer Gesellschaft. (qtd. in *Filmheft Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* 23)

Not only does the booklet omit the fact that Ferdinand von Schirach is the grandson of Baldur von Schirach, the Hitler Youth leader, which ought to be relevant in the context of discussing the collective German memory of the Third Reich, but the claim that there are no Holocaust jokes is simply wrong. They do exist, if predominantly in Israeli culture. Humorous representations of the Third Reich even exist in German culture: late-night talk show host Harald Schmidt, for instance, is famous for his Hitler impersonation. Furthermore, representations of the Third Reich that employ humor do not necessarily transform the subject into profanity: for instance, Art Spiegelman's two-volume *Maus* comic employs a traditionally humorous genre to depict his father's camp experiences. And the last claim that the Third Reich and the Holocaust have been excluded from German society is not only completely wrong as the subject has been overtly present, but it was clearly not excluded because its humorous representation constituted a taboo. In short, the excerpt from von Schirach's interview is misinformed and nonsensical and would serve to distract from rather than generate a critical discussion about the social function of taboos.

Overall, the booklet does not adequately situate the diary and the film in the historical context. Before the class watches and discusses the movie, it is necessary to devote class time to

review the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust and to enable students to discuss film and/or diary in its/their historical context. The booklet should furthermore provide information about the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* and *SS*, and the notion that they were committed in the name of all Germans and that therefore all Germans bore responsibility. The teaching material moreover lacks sufficient information on the *Opferdebatte*, including other literary, televisual, and cinematic depictions of Germans as victims, and about the complex discursive history of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Only if students know about the atrocities committed in the Third Reich and the resulting difficulty of commemorating German civilian victims would they be able to be critical audiences of the diary and especially the film

The second set of teaching materials, which was created by history and German teacher Tanja Seider, is likewise available on the internet, and the website [www.kinofenster.de](http://www.kinofenster.de) similarly suggests to teach the film to students who are sixteen years or older. Seider argues that the film can be employed in various subjects, including German, politics, history, ethics, Russian and even music. Her teaching material includes didactic suggestions as well as concrete work sheets. For the German classroom, she proposes two topics. The first, “Das Bild des Kriegsheimkehrers in der Trümmerliteratur und Filmen der Nachkriegszeit,” contextualizes the film in a discussion about the psychological effects of war. It focuses on German war veterans who initially supported National Socialism and proudly fought for their *Führer* and country and who returned as defeated, weak, and damaged wrecks. It illustrates the horror of war and what it does to human beings. This topic, which is also thematized in both the diary and its film adaptation when Anonyma’s boyfriend Gerd returns from the front, emphasizes the status of Germans as victims since it underlines the suffering of German soldiers, particularly at the Eastern front and as prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. Although it is important to emphasise the physical and

psychological destruction generated by war, it is also essential to emphasize that *Wehrmacht* soldiers played a crucial part in the Nazi killing machine, that Germany started the war, and that the subject position of soldiers is an inherently conflicted one as they are simultaneously perpetrators and victims. It is thus necessary, to evaluate the representation of the *Kriegsheimkehrer* in West German literature and film critically and point out the one-sided portrayal as victims as ethically problematic.

For the history classroom, Seider maps out three topics. The first, “Nationalsozialismus/ Zweiter Weltkrieg: Die Darstellung der sowjetischen Bevölkerung in der nationalsozialistischen Lebensraum-Ideologie” asks students to analyze historical texts and pictures and to compare them to the depiction of Soviet soldiers in the film. The second topic, “Geschichtskultur: Die Verbrechen der deutschen Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion” provides an exercise in which students work with historical photographs from the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* and discuss the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in Nazi crimes as well as the recent public debate the exhibition generated in Germany. Seider calls the third topic “Der große vaterländische Krieg im kollektiven Gedächtnis heutiger Russen” and asks students to interview Russians, e.g., fellow students of Russian heritage and/or their family members about their views of the Second World War.

These complex discussion topics challenge students and engage them in a critical analysis of the historical context of *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin*. The exercises expose the anti-Russian propaganda of the Third Reich and can contribute to an explanation why the filmmakers sought so strongly to avoid depicting the Red Army in such stereotypes. Discussing the Russian collective memory of the Second World War II can make students aware of significant differences in national memories and enable them to critically evaluate the official German

memory as well as the communicative memory passed on via family stories. The third exercise generates the necessary balance to the subject of “Das Bild des Kriegsheimkehrers in der Trümmerliteratur und Filmen der Nachkriegszeit,” which Seider suggested for German classes, as the Wehrmacht exhibition demonstrated that Wehrmacht soldiers were actively involved in crimes against civilians on the Eastern front. Teaching students the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the *Opferdebatte* is essential before watching *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* to prevent students from perceiving the German characters solely as victims and the Russian characters as perpetrators. Seider suggests that the different aspects of the film be discussed at the same time in German and history classes. While this is easier if both courses are taught by the same teacher and requires significant coordination between teachers otherwise, this multi-disciplinary approach would be beneficial as it generates discursive interactions between courses.

In addition to the above topics which contextualize and expand on the film, Seider created a detailed worksheet that for the analysis of the film itself. She divides it into the following six sections:

1. Ein Tagebuch verfilmen: über subjektives Erzählen im Film.
2. Figurengestaltung reflektieren.
3. Befreier oder Besatzer? Zur Darstellung der sowjetischen Alliierten im kollektiven Gedächtnis der Deutschen.
4. Filmästhetik untersuchen.
5. Vergewaltigungen als Mittel der Kriegsführung gegen Zivilisten/innen im Licht internationaler Rechtssprechung.
6. Die psychischen Auswirkungen von Extremsituationen reflektieren.

While sections 1 and 4 analyze film techniques and sections 5 and 6 the subject of rape in wartime generally, sections 2 and 3 focus on the collective memory of the occupation in 1945 and will thus be discussed in more detail here. Section 2 analyzes how the different groups of figures, Russian soldiers, German women and German men, are represented in the film with regard to their war experiences. Students are asked to do the following:

Bilden Sie drei Expertengruppen zu 1. den deutschen Frauen, 2. den russischen Soldaten, 3. den deutschen Männern. Teilen Sie innerhalb Ihrer Expertengruppe die Beobachtungsaufgaben für folgende Figuren unter sich auf: 1. Deutsche Frauen (Anonyma/ Bärbel/ Witwe/ Ilse Hoch/ Flüchtlingsmädchen); 2. Russische Soldaten (Der Major Andrej/ Soldat mongolischer Herkunft/ Anatol/ Soldatin/ Soldaten allgemein); 3. Deutsche Männer (Gerd, Eckhart, Herr Hoch, junger desertierter Wehrmachtssoldat).

Students are given the following tasks:

a) Beobachten Sie während des Films Ihre Figur und deren Handlungsmotivation. Orientieren Sie sich dabei an folgenden Leitfragen: Was hat der Krieg für meine Figur bedeutet? Wie erlebt sie das Kriegsende? Welches Leid hat sie erfahren und wie geht sie damit um? Welche Wünsche, Hoffnungen und Ängste hat sie für die Zukunft? Erstellen Sie nach der Filmsichtung ein Kurzporträt Ihrer Figur in Form eines Steckbriefs in der Kleingruppe in der Ich-Perspektive. Präsentieren Sie diesen in der Expertengruppe.

b) Analysieren Sie die Beziehungen zwischen (A) den deutschen Frauen und den russischen Soldaten sowie (B) den deutschen Frauen und den deutschen Männern.

Analyzing the plot from the different perspectives of their respective figure gives students an understanding of how the victors and the defeated, women and men experienced the end of the war. Imagining themselves in their position helps students empathize with them, see similarities between all three groups, and realize that the distinction between perpetrators and victims is not necessarily a dichotomy but that perpetrators (as well as bystanders and followers) can become victims and, vice versa, victims can become perpetrators. The exercise thus counteracts thinking in simplistic dichotomies.

Section 3, “Befreier oder Besatzer? Zur Darstellung der sowjetischen Alliierten im kollektiven Gedächtnis der Deutschen” explores how the Russian occupation is represented in German collective memory. Students are asked to do the following research projects:

a) Schließen Sie sich einer von zwei Expertengrossgruppen an.

Gruppe 1: Führen Sie eine Umfrage im öffentlichen Raum (Straße, Veranstaltungen) durch, in der Sie die Interviewpartner/innen zu ihrem Bild der sowjetischen Alliierten befragen. Nehmen Sie die Antworten auf Tonband auf.

Gruppe 2: Besuchen Sie in Kleingruppen ein Archiv mit Berliner Zeitungen. Recherchieren Sie, wie die sowjetischen Alliierten im Jahr 1945 dargestellt wurden. Finden Sie auch heraus, welche politische Ausrichtung die Zeitungen haben, aus denen Sie zitieren.

b) Veranstalten Sie eine Pressekonferenz für Ihre Nachbarklasse, auf der beide Gruppen Ihre Ergebnisse in einer Präsentation vorstellen.

Section 3 thus explores how Germans perceived Russians in 1945 and how ideologies influenced the perception and elaborates on how Germans remember the Russian occupation today. This exercise incites students to explore the discursive relations between the representation of Russians in 1945 in Berlin newspapers and the contemporary collective memory of the occupation. Section 4, which focuses on film techniques, interacts with the two preceding sections as it emphasizes how the film portrays the three core groups of figures and how these techniques influence our perception.

Seider's teaching materials have been laudatorily reviewed at [www.lernenausdergeschichte.de](http://www.lernenausdergeschichte.de) ("Empfehlung Film"), which also provides links to the booklet:

Der Autorin gelingt es, den Film für eine fächerübergreifende Erarbeitung der Thematiken 'Sexuelle Gewalt nach der Befreiung Deutschlands 1945' ebenso nutzbar zu machen wie für eine filmanalytische Sicht auf die Präsentation der Bilder von 'Russen' und 'Deutschen'. Dies ist nicht zuletzt deshalb von Bedeutung, da die Geschichte des Filmes eine im Gedächtnis der deutschen Gesellschaft präsenste Geschichte aufnimmt – die in Teilen rassistisch aufgeladene Perspektive auf die russischen Besatzer/innen und ihr Vorgehen in den befreiten deutschen Gebieten – welche lange Zeit fachhistorisch wenig erforscht worden ist. [...] Positiv hervorzuheben ist ebenfalls, dass die Unterrichtsvorschläge die russische Perspektive auf den 'Großen Vaterländischen Krieg' zu einem Auseinandersetzungspunkt machen. Dies dürfte nicht nur die Perspektiven aller



Lernenden erweitern, sondern auch ein interessanter Diskussionspunkt in Schulklassen mit in russischen Familien aufgewachsenen Jugendlichen sein. Ist doch die russische Diskussion um 'Krieg' und 'Besatzung' deutlich anders konturiert als die in der Bundesrepublik. Durch Einwanderung ist diese Erzählung jedoch auch zum Bestandteil der deutschen Erinnerungslandschaft geworden.

Anonyma's diary is an honest account that depicts the horror of wartime rape and touches on, if only in passing, German collective guilt and responsibility and that of individual Germans. However, the film adaptation fails in adequately portraying the magnitude and brutality of the mass rapes, irresponsibly casts revenge as the sole and ethically justifiable cause for the rapes and general violence and thus exculpates the Russian soldiers from their responsibility. Despite the fact that the *Wehrmacht* and *SS* committed similar and worse crimes and that the majority of German women were followers and bystanders, it is deeply unethical to consider the brutal mass rapes of some two million women as just punishment. The vast majority of the official and vernacular reviewers of the film reflects and reinforces the notion that Germans were perpetrators, followers, and bystanders first. While a minority even advocates that therefore German civilian victims ought not to be commemorated, because their suffering pales in comparison to that caused by atrocities committed by Germans, the majority seeks to find ways to implement the commemoration of Germans, who became victims of bombings, flight and expulsion, and mass rapes, into collective German memory. While both teaching manuals refrain from onesidedly portraying Germans as victims by historically contextualizing the film, particularly the first lacks concrete didactic directions on how to teach the historical context that led to the Russian occupation and to the violence against German women. Without adequate

knowledge of the atrocities committed by Germans, the representation of German civilian victimhood may regenerate the 1950s West German notion that the six million German victims balance the score and thus relativize the Holocaust. However, it is striking that none of the official or vernacular commentators nor the authors of the teaching materials revived this notion, that comments from the extremist Right are absent and no one employed German victimhood for revisionist approaches to German history.

#### 4. Transforming Germans from Perpetrators into Victims in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*

Bernhard Schlink's novel *Der Vorleser*, which was published in Germany in 1995, became a bestseller in 1999 after talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey discussed it in the book club section of her show. In 2008, the novel was adapted into a Hollywood movie which was nominated for several major awards and Kate Winslet won the 2009 Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of the former woman concentration camp guard Hanna. Schlink's novel depicts the affair of fifteen-year-old high school student Michael and thirty-six year old Hanna as well as the long-term consequences for Michael of learning about Hanna's past, which only becomes gradually apparent to both the first-person narrator Michael as well as the reader. Schlink, who was born in 1944, the same year as his narrator-protagonist Michael Berg, is a professor of law and practicing judge, and writer of detective novels. *Der Vorleser* received national and international acclaim and won several awards, including the Hans-Fallada Preis and the WELT-Literaturpreis. It was translated into over forty-one languages and was not only well received in Germany but also in the United States. In fact, after Winfrey recommended it, *Der Vorleser* became the first German novel to top *The New York Times* bestseller list. The immense success of *Der Vorleser* has brought Schlink international renown, particularly after the American film adaptation which entered German theaters in February 2009. The novel appeals to a wide readership. According to Tilman Krause's (1999) article in *Die Welt*, "das hat es seit den Tagen der Gruppe 47 nicht mehr gegeben: einen deutschen Roman, den wirklich alle gelesen haben – Die literarischen Feinschmecker wie der kulturhungrige Frisör." The official reception in German newspaper reviews from the highbrow *FAZ* to the populist *Bildzeitung* was predominantly positive. *Der Vorleser* even found its way into German school curricula.

Numerous interpretations and didactic manuals, which are likewise largely uncritical of the text, have been published since 1999 (Schmitz, “I could not” 55).

The novel touches such significant discourses as the representation of the Holocaust, ethics and conscience, guilt and shame, identity conflicts, melancholia, and the subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*. However, in merging the significant and ubiquitous subject of the Holocaust with a steamy love affair, Schlink sugar-coats the highbrow subject of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by employing the preeminent popular culture plot paradigm of sex-and-crime. Schlink thus presents a difficult and complex subject in a way that makes it easily digestible and does not expect critical thinking from the reader. Instead, the narrative’s melodramatic plot appeals to the reader’s sentiment. Although *Der Vorleser* pretends to be a highbrow novel about coming to terms with the Holocaust it actually constitutes what Willi Winkler (2002) dubbed “Holo Kitsch.” And while the representation of the Holocaust and its aftereffects via the sex-and-crime paradigm of popular culture is ethically and aesthetically inadequate, *Der Vorleser* even exculpates Hanna from her crimes on the grounds that her actual illiteracy also made her morally illiterate and thus unable to distinguish right and wrong.

This chapter thus expands the discussion of German victimhood from bystanders and followers by analyzing a text that casts even a perpetrator as a victim. As in the preceding chapter, I analyze the novel’s official and vernacular reception as well as its recent film adaptation and the latter’s respective official and vernacular reception because text and film themselves only constitute the potential of transforming collective German memory of the Third Reich. It is only via the reception analysis that one can see how this potential was actualized.

*Hanna's and Michael's Victimhood in the Novel*

The novel echoes the West German tradition of the auto-fictional *Vaterbücher* from the 1970s and 1980s, which functioned as the voice of the second generation, the children of perpetrators, followers, and bystanders, who attempted to come to terms with their parents' refusal of guilt and responsibility. The texts were a reflection of the widespread social unrest and tension between both generations. The authors, who were born during or shortly after the Second World War, began to confront their fathers' political choices and conduct during National Socialism. These narratives of the so called *Kriegskinder* are accusatory confrontations with their fathers, and to a lesser extent their mothers. *Der Vorleser* is a "historization of and reflection on this German generation conflict that has determined so much of the German mind since the mid 1960s" (Schmitz, "I could not" 55). Although *Der Vorleser* also explores the relationship between the *Tätergeneration* and the second generation, the twist in Schlink's narrative is the change from the relation between (adult) children and their fathers to the erotic relationship between fifteen-year-old Michael and thirty-five-year-old Hanna.

Since it is important to know the plot of *Der Vorleser* in order to understand how Schlink portrays "Germany as victim" (Bartov 34) a short summary of the novel follows here. The events are recounted by the protagonist, Michael Berg, in a first person narrative approximately thirty five years after the point in time when the first chapter begins. This narrative perspective and the fact that Schlink and his narrator-protagonist share such core biographical details as the year of their birth and the fact that both studied law as well as the fact that Schlink refused to answer any questions about possible autobiographical aspects in the text has prompted many critics and readers to consider Michael Schlink's alter ego. The novel consists of three parts. The first is set in 1958 and focuses on the sexual initiation and relationship between Michael and Hanna, who is

twenty years his senior. She comes to Michael's help one day when he becomes ill on the street as he is coming down with jaundice. Later he visits Hanna to thank her and is seduced into an affair with her. Michael's reading aloud to Hanna from German classics he has to read for school becomes a significant part of their relationship. When Hanna suddenly disappears, Michael is devastated by feelings of loss and guilt, because he mistakenly assumes that he caused it by his betrayal of not acknowledging her at a public pool when he was among friends.

In the second part, Michael is a law student who participates in a seminar that observes a Nazi war crimes trial where five women who had served as guards at a concentration camp are being tried. To his surprise, Michael recognizes one of the women as Hanna. The five women are accused of having locked Jewish women in a church and not opened the door even after it had been bombed and caught fire. The question as to which of the guards was responsible for the death of all but two of the Jewish women depends on the identity of the writer of a report on the incident which constitutes the main piece of evidence in the trial. When asked to give a writing sample, Hanna confesses to having written the report. However, based on his trial observations and past experience with Hanna, Michael comes to the conclusion that Hanna is illiterate, a handicap she had tried to hide all her life, and that it was only to avoid the uncovering of her illiteracy that she had declined a promotion at a Siemens factory and rather become a concentration camp guard. He also realizes that it was not his refusal to acknowledge her in front of his friends that caused her to suddenly disappear but because she had been offered the position as a street car driver for which she would have had to participate in a training course which would have exposed her illiteracy. In order to keep her secret, Hanna even falsely confesses to the sole responsibility for the death of the Jewish women and is sentenced to life imprisonment, a plot element that seems rather improbable.

In the last section, Michael is middle-aged, divorced and the father of a child. Hanna is still in prison. Michael begins to tape himself reading books and, without prior contact with her and without including any notes with the tapes, sends them to Hanna. In another rather improbable plot development, Hanna teaches herself to read and write with the help of the tapes. After eighteen years in prison during which she was a model prisoner, she is paroled. As she has had no contact with the outside world except for Michael's regular tapes, the prison warden contacts Michael, asking him to help her re-enter life. He meets Hanna once prior to her release and despite the fact that he is essentially physically repulsed by the old woman she has become, he makes arrangements for her post-prison life. However, on the morning of her scheduled release, Michael finds out that Hanna has killed herself, a necessary plot twist to prevent Michael from finally having to confront Hanna and himself with her crimes. Although she was not responsible for the deaths of the Jewish women for which she was convicted, she had still been a camp guard. In her suicide note, Hanna asks Michael to give her savings to the only living survivor of the church fire. Michael visits the survivor in New York, but she refuses to take the savings because she considers this gesture to be absolving Hanna of her guilt and suggests that he donate it to any charity provided it is not related to the Holocaust. Michael chooses the Jewish League against Illiteracy. The survivor, however, does keep the tin in which Hanna had kept her money since she had a similar one, which was stolen in the camp. Another ten years later, Michael begins writing their story.

*Der Vorleser* engages the discourse about German victimhood with regard to both protagonists. As its narrator, Michael exculpates Hanna from her guilt of serving as a concentration camp guard by portraying her as a victim of circumstance and casts himself as a victim of his helpless shame for having loved her (Long 30). Beginning with the latter, I analyze

how Michael turns both Hanna and himself into victims. At the center of the novel is the conflict between Michael's postwar generation, who angrily reproved their parents for being Nazi followers or even perpetrators. In their zeal to expose particularly their fathers as deeply implicated in Nazi crimes, they self-aggrandizingly appointed themselves their parents' judges. Their sense of moral superiority allowed them to distance themselves from the collective and individual guilt of their parents. They also accused their fathers and mothers of not having admitted their guilt and that therefore the next generation, who was innocent with regard to committing or tolerating Nazi crimes, had to bear this burden for them. Last but not least, the postwar generation considered themselves as suffering from the shame and guilt they felt for loving their guilty parents. This self pity gave rise to a sense of victimhood among the postwar German generation (McGlothlin 213). Through the insistence on their own suffering, the second generation generated an affiliation with the actual Nazi victims whose suffering and victimhood was thus unethically relativized. Ernestine Schlant considers this the failure of the postwar generation since they thus avoided a true confrontation with the past (82). As mentioned above, in *Der Vorleser*, this generational conflict is not embedded in a family relationship. Michael's father was not a perpetrator; he was even dismissed from his university position for planning a lecture on Spinoza. In Schlink's novel, the familiar conflict is not only *verfremdet* by being placed into the context of the erotic relationship between Hanna and Michael but also by being displaced from it as Michael only learns of Hanna's past long after their relationship ended.

Michael explicitly expresses his victim status as a member of the second generation when he states that his suffering is paradigmatic for his generation: "Wie sollte es ein Trost sein, daß mein Leiden an meiner Liebe zu Hanna in gewisser Weise das Schicksal meiner Generation, das deutsche Schicksal war" (163). However, his suffering is even increased by the fact that his love



for Hanna is not by accident, by birth, but by his own choice which makes him feel unable to condemn Hanna without condemning himself (Long 52). During the trial, when he finds out that Hanna was a concentration camp guard, he has to undergo a process of self-questioning that the other students, he thinks, can avoid because unlike the love of a child for a parent, erotic love is chosen. Michael thus feels guilty for his choice of loving a perpetrator (Schlant 211). However, it is never quite clear why he feels guilty (Schlant 211) since when he fell in love with Hanna, he did not know about her past. Therefore, Michael's repeated professions of guilt remain nebulous (Long 52). He presents himself as the ultimate suffering innocent, i.e., someone who essentially suffers for the guilt resulting from another's crime. Like the postwar generation at large, Michael's rather self-aggrandizing mea-culpas, which covertly serve to establish his victim status, depends on Hanna's status as perpetrator (Donahue 66).

Michael's status as a victim is reinforced by the fact that he is structurally associated with Jewish victims because during the trial, it is revealed that Hanna had removed young and delicate girls from hard labor and had them read to her in private, like Michael did during their relationship (Bartov 34). We never learn what Hanna's motivation was for making the girls read to her. Furthermore, when Michael talks to the only survivor of the church fire after Hanna's death and, upon her question, admits to their relationship, the survivor comments "was ist diese Frau brutal gewesen. Haben sie's verkraftet, dass sie mit fünfzehn ..." (202). The unnamed survivor highlights their age difference and hence the unequal power relationship between Hanna and Michael. Schlant indicates that "in a fantasy of reverse restitution, the victimization of the successor generation by the perpetrators is validated by a Holocaust victim" (216). Michael himself had already espoused the dubious analogy between the experiences of perpetrators, victims and spectators of the trial:

Wie der KZ-Häftling, der Monat um Monat überlebt und sich gewöhnt hat und das Entsetzen der neu Ankommenden gleichmütig registriert. Mit derselben Betäubung registriert, mit der er das Morden und Sterben selbst wahrnimmt. Alle Literatur der Überlebenden berichtet von dieser Betäubung, unter der die Funktionen des Lebens reduziert, das Verhalten teilnahms- und rücksichtslos und Vergasung und Verbrennung alltäglich wurden. Auch in den spärlichen Äußerungen der Täter begegnen die Gaskammern und Verbrennungsöfen als alltägliche Umwelt, die Täter selbst auf wenige Funktionen reduziert, in ihrer Rücksichts- und Teilnahmslosigkeit, ihrer Stumpfheit wie betäubt oder betrunken. Die Angeklagten kamen mir vor, als seien sie noch immer und für immer in dieser Betäubung befangen, in ihr gewissermaßen versteinert. Schon damals, als mich diese Gemeinsamkeit des Betäubtseins beschäftigte und auch, daß die Betäubung sich nicht nur auf Täter und Opfer gelegt hatte, sondern auch auf uns legte, die wir als Richter oder Schöffen, Staatsanwälte oder Protokollanten später damit zu tun hatten. (98-99)

Relating the subject positions of victims and perpetrators in death camps via their sense of numbness is ethically irresponsible as it not only infuses perpetrators with some of the victim's suffering but thus also transforms the dichotomous positions into a continuum of numbness. Relating both victims and perpetrators to the postwar generation by conflating the experiences of the former to the reception experiences of their narratives by the latter is likewise nonsensical and ethically untenable.

And while Michael's provocative question "was sollte und soll meine Generation der Nachlebenden eigentlich mit den Informationen ueber die Furchtbarkeiten der Vernichtung der Juden anfangen?" (99) could indicate an innovative critique of the function of Holocaust representations in German culture, according to Schlant, in Schlink's novel it indicates Michael's unwillingness to honestly confront the Nazi past (215) and his inability to feel compassion for the Holocaust victims. Neither the testimony of the victims at the trial nor his visit to the unnamed concentration camp where Hanna served as guard evokes in him the compassion he feels towards Hanna. When thinking about the student movement of the 1960s, Michael even reduces the Holocaust into an epiphenomenon of a timeless generational conflict (Long 54) when he argues that "manchmal denke ich, dass die Auseinandersetzung mit der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit nicht der Grund, sondern der Ausdruck des Generationenkonflikts war, der als treibende Kraft der Studentenbewegung zu spüren war" (161). While Michael thus casts himself as an innocently suffering victim, he nevertheless illogically also portrays Hanna as a victim, thus transforming the subject position of a camp guard from perpetrator into victim.

Nazis are often represented as criminally insane sadists in popular culture depictions of the Holocaust. By contrast, *Der Vorleser* encourages the reader to empathize with Hanna. Although her motivation for having young female prisoners read to her is never established, Michael portrays Hanna's decision to decline the promotion at *Siemens* and become a concentration camp guard to avoid the uncovering of her illiteracy as not morally accountable because her handicap rendered her morally illiterate, unable to distinguish right and wrong. Furthermore, as the trial proceeds, she is unable to review the trial documents which could have significantly helped her defense and even confesses to sole responsibility for a crime in which she only participated because she tries to hide her illiteracy at all cost, whether that means

becoming a camp guard or a life sentence. The novel not only generates the dubious notion that Hanna's illiteracy is a mitigating factor in her crimes, which are furthermore effaced from the text, but even casts her as primarily a victim. Her inability to read and write not only serves as a questionable exculpation for becoming a camp guard but also to establish Hanna as a victim of the other guards who accept her false confession, which partly exonerates them, without contradiction. As such, her life sentence is unjust and Hanna's dominant subject position is transformed from that of perpetrator to that of an innocent victim and the fact that Hanna is in fact guilty of being a part of the Nazi killing machine becomes marginal. Both Hanna's motivations and crimes are absent from the text, as they would prevent the reader's empathy for her which the text encoded as the dominant mode of reception. We only learn that Hanna has a brutal side because, evoking the Nazi sadist figure of pornography, during a bike tour with Michael she gets upset and hits him in the face with a leather belt. And while the unnamed survivor briefly alludes to Hanna's brutality, not only does this comment also pertain to Hanna's relationship with Michael, i.e., it serves to establish a structural analogy between him and the Holocaust victims. But unlike Jeffrey I. Roth's (2004) interpretation that the survivor is the only credible source in the novel since she is an eyewitness who knew Hanna in the camp, despite the manipulative use of direct speech, we do not have unmediated access to the survivor's discourse because like the entire novel it is filtered via Michael's narration.

The ethically untenable transformation of Hanna from a perpetrator into a victim rests solely on the rather unconvincing metaphorical extension of Hanna's illiteracy into moral illiteracy or lack of moral intelligence (Swales 8). If Hanna is unable to spell out the basics of moral language (Niven 383), she can be exculpated from her (unspecified) crimes. The interpretation of Hanna as not responsible for her crimes because of her moral illiteracy, which is

the dominant notion in the novel, has been questioned by a number of literary critics. Swales argued that Hanna is rather driven by the shame for her inability to read and write and Niven similarly argues that Hanna was motivated by a fear of stigmatization, neither of which could exculpate her crimes. Schlant asks, “but if illiteracy is not the explanation and excuse for Hanna’s acts, then what function does it serve in the novel?” (213). It serves precisely the unethical function of exculpating Hanna and transforming her from a perpetrator into a victim. Misrepresenting Hanna as an innocent victim diverts the reader’s attention from both her crimes and the actual victims of the ‘Final Solution.’

Although literary scholars contradicted the notion that Hanna’s illiteracy exculpates her from her crimes, the novel represents this as the dominant mode of interpretation. It is reinforced by the fact that when Hanna learns to read and write in prison, she reads the canonical German writers and, subsequently, survivor memoirs, perpetrator accounts and even scholarly works on the Holocaust which supposedly engenders an ethical transformation in her. While this plot development reveals Schlink’s *Bildungsbürger* status and belief in the simple solutions of pop psychology, its probability is minimal and it remains unconvincing. Kristina Brazatis likewise argued that “it is also difficult to find much evidence for what some see as Hanna’s ‘moral transformation’ apart from a few flimsy references” (13). And according to Niven, Hanna’s initial motivation for learning to read and write in prison is overcoming of the “solipsism of shame” (393), which is not a particularly ethical or altruistic incentive. Conveniently for Michael (and Schlink), Hanna kills herself and neither has to face the crimes she committed. Hanna’s motives for the suicide are never explicitly revealed. Although fear of life outside prison may have been a contributing factor, the novel predominantly suggests the suicide to be the supposedly logical consequence of her belated moral awakening engendered by the German

literary canon and canonical Holocaust texts. Particularly the former cannot be invoked as generating moral enlightenment because many Nazis were well-versed in German and other canonical literature.<sup>39</sup> The interpretation that the suicide constitutes a form of penance is further reinforced by her gesture of leaving the money to the sole survivor of the church fire. The survivor refuses to accept the money but she keeps Hanna's tin. Although this is not the absolution Hanna seems to have hoped for, "the text appears to endorse Hanna's gesture of the so called atonement" and thus incites the reader to likewise forgive Hanna's crimes (Long 57).

*Der Vorleser* essentially omits the representation of the Holocaust. Apart from the church fire, when the guards did not open the doors, Hanna's crimes and those of the other guards as well as the suffering of the victims remain nebulous and unreal. Furthermore, the only two survivors of the church fire are depicted in a rather negative light. While Hanna is characterized as naïve, natural, feminine, erotic and sympathetic, particularly the younger survivor – who is the key witness in the trial and who incriminates Hanna severely – appears cold, factual, unemotional and unsympathetic. While Holocaust survivors have certainly been sentimentalized, particularly when represented in American popular culture and differing from the stereotype of the quasi-saintly survivor is legitimate, in Schlink's novel it is unethically employed to engender empathy for perpetrator-cum-victim Hanna rather than for the Holocaust victims and survivors. Michael furthermore describes the survivors's testimony "nicht präzise" (109) therefore not in the position to ascertain the guilt of the perpetrators (Bartov 32). In Michael's representation of the trial, they actually victimize Hanna, who if not quite innocent is not as guilty as she is accused of. Moreover, *Der Vorleser* strips the two survivors – who represent all Holocaust victims – of their individuality as they remain nameless. Throughout the novel, Michael refers to

<sup>39</sup> Schlink presents the "untypical" as the "typical." Hanna, as the uneducated illiterate, is the exception to the rule. Most Nazis were well educated with appreciation for *Kultur* and *Kunst*. Particularly in Holocaust survivor memoirs, the most highly educated camp guards are described as the most brutal.

them only as *die Mutter* and *die Tochter*. Schlant suggests that their namelessness and facelessness are perhaps also emblematic of Michael's reluctance to confront those who suffered, particularly those who suffered under Hanna's supervision (215). The suffering of the Holocaust victims thus remains distant and abstract; they evoke no emotion or pity in Hanna or Michael. As the text represents the survivors in a negative light and ignores their suffering, it discourages that the reader empathizes with the true victims.

Schlink stated in an interview that "wenn die, die monströse Taten begangen haben, immer Monster wären, ganz fremd, ganz anders, hätten wir nichts mit ihnen gemein und wären rasch mit ihnen fertig" (*Filmheft Der Vorleser* 14). While critique of the simplistic demonization of nazi perpetrators is legitimate and necessary, according to Long, overemphasizing our human proximity to the perpetrators runs the risk of encouraging empathy for them in a way that prevents critical judgement of their crimes (55). *Der Vorleser*, then, incites empathy with Hanna and even transforms her from a perpetrator into a victim who, in sync with popular psychology, passes on their own trauma to others, particularly the postwar generation of Germans. As Michael represents the *Kriegskinder* and Hanna embodies the perpetrator generation, *Der Vorleser* not only exculpates the Germans collectively but even transforms them into victims. In Schlink's novel not the Holocaust victims but their murderers assume the status of victim, in other words, *Der Vorleser* displaces Nazi victims from their discursive position and replaces them with "Germany as victim" (Bartov 34). Transforming both perpetrators and the postwar German generation into victims downplays and belittles the suffering and victimhood of the real victims. This is an unethical tendency since it entails historical revisionism.

*The Official Reception in Newspaper Reviews*

*Der Vorleser* has attracted much attention among German and international critics. It was a huge commercial and critical success and the many reviews are mostly favorable. Overall, in the U.K. and the U.S. the novel was criticized more vigorously, whereas in Germany the reviews were largely laudatory. The reception of the novel in Germany can be divided into two different phases. Immediately after its publication in 1995, the novel received rave reviews. The second phase was ignited outside of Germany in the U.K. in March 2002 by Jeremy Adler's scathing review. First published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, it generated a more critical second wave of reviews in Germany when it was published in German translation in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In the 1990s, German reviews, which focused on the novel's language and narration strategies, the love story, the subject of guilt, and intergenerational conflicts, celebrated Schlink's novel enthusiastically. Rainer Moritz (1995) even concludes in *Weltwoche*, "was für ein Glück, dass dieses Buch geschrieben wurde" (n.pag.). Reviewers particularly praise Schlink's writing style and language. Michael Stolleis (1995) emphasizes Schlink's "einfühlsame und transparente Sprache" (B) in the *FAZ* and Christoph Stoelzl (1999) writes in *Die Welt* that the novel is written with "Leichtigkeit und Eleganz." Most reviews, however, stress the novel's honesty. Rainer Moritz (1995), for instance, writes:

Der Vorleser ist ein Roman von bestechender Aufrichtigkeit. Er fegt die bequemen Ausflüchte all derer hinfort, die einem 'Aufarbeiten der Vergangenheit' eilfertig das Wort reden. Wenn Michael Berg einräumt: 'Ich bin damit nicht fertig geworden', so spricht er ungewollt aus, was andere, viele andere vertuschen. 'Schamarbeit',



‘Erinnerungsarbeit’ -- so lauten die modischen Betroffenheitsvokabeln, die Absolution vorgaukeln. (n.pag.)

Reviewers furthermore praise Schlink for portraying Hanna not as a stereotype but as an ordinary person and not primarily as a perpetrator but as a victim. Peter Michalzik (1995) writes in the *taz*:

Die Provokation des Buches liegt in dem positiven Blickwinkel, aus dem Hanna, ein Mensch, den die Zeitungen damals als Monster bezeichnet hätten, beschrieben wird. Dazu führt der Analphabetismus. Er steht zwar nicht in direktem Zusammenhang mit ihrem Verbrechen im Dritten Reich, aber er macht sie selbst zu einem Opfer und gibt zu Spekulationen über die Motivation Hannas Anlass. Ihr Leben war vom Versuch geprägt, ihre Behinderung zu verbergen, das macht sie zu einer ängstlichen, unbewussten, Peinigungen der Umwelt hilflos ausgesetzten Person. (8)

While the reviews in the first phase were generally very positive, there were very few critical voices. Most prominently, Sigrid Löffler condemned the novel in the discussion among critics on the television program *Literarische Quartett* (ZDF) in December 1995 for its ambiguous treatment of the illiteracy theme and argues that it functions as a mitigating factor that exculpates Hanna from her crime:

Analphabetismus ist schon mal ein Thema, das hier auch als Entschuldigung eingeführt wird: Denn die Frau – es geht gar nicht so sehr um die Verbrechen, die sie als KZ

Aufseherin begangen hat – kann gar nicht mehr so Schuld sein, weil ihr solches Unrecht im Prozess passiert. Also eigentlich ist die ganze Strategie des Romans eine Relativierung von Schuld durch diesen Analphabetismus. Und das zweite – durch diese Liebesgeschichte. Zum dritten wird diese Person im dritten Teil im Gefängnis geradezu zur Heroine, die nämlich zu ihrer eigenen Läuterung diesen Gefängnisaufenthalt auf sich nimmt.

Apart from Löffler's insightful comment, critics do not consider the depiction of a perpetrator as a victim via the moral illiteracy metaphor and the representation of the Holocaust in the context of a sex-and-crime melodrama ethically or aesthetically questionable. While most reviewers do not explore how the novel represents the Holocaust, the few that do, are rather impressed by the writer's supposedly unique and new approach of coming to terms with the past. And while most reviews do not even mention the fact that Schlink portrays a perpetrator in a way that incites empathy in readers, the few that do reflect on it welcome that *Der Vorleser* depicts a perpetrator as a human being and not as a stereotypical Nazi. It was most striking that the majority of reviews and interviews with Schlink did not focus on the novel's subject of coming to terms with Germany's past, but rather highlight the scandalous love story. However, even while focusing on the relationship between Michael and Hanna, reviews do not reflect on the use of the Holocaust in this story of sexual initiation but rather wonder whether the storyline is autobiographical or discuss it as a form of child abuse. In the 1990s, the German and international reception of *Der Vorleser* was thus overwhelmingly positive and reviews did not critique the novel as engaging in the mitigation of German guilt by transforming a perpetrator into a victim.

This changed in March 2002, when the British *Times Literary Supplement* heralded a debate about the moral qualities of the novel, and from then on, critical voices became predominant. *Der Vorleser* was originally published in England in 1997 and a commercial and critical success. Mainstream reviews were positive throughout. Even eminent Jewish philosopher and literary critic George Steiner (1997) calls the novel in the *Observer* “masterful,” writes that it “is rapidly becoming a touchstone of moral literacy” and concludes that “the reviewer’s sole function is to say as loudly as he is able ‘Read this’ and ‘Read it again’” (n.pag.). It was not until the English translation of Schlink’s short story collection *Liebesfluchten* appeared in 2002 that critics started to re-evaluate *Der Vorleser*. British novelist Frederic Raphael (2002) and Lawrence Norfolk (2002) as well as London Germanist (and son of a Holocaust survivor) Jeremy Adler (2002) argued that the novel minimizes the German guilt for Nazi crimes. Norfolk’s and Adler’s reviews were printed in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* whose literary critic Willi Winkler supported the claims which ignited a feuilleton debate about the novel’s treatment of the Holocaust.

The critical reviews of *Der Vorleser* admonish several aspects of the novel. First, they object to the novel’s conflation of the experiences of perpetrators, victims, and even audiences by a *Gemeinsamkeit des Betäubtseins*. Adler (2002) writes that “die Kunst, Mitleid mit den Mördern zu erzwingen: Diese selbstgerechte Instrumentalisierung des Opfers ist praktisch ein Vorwurf an die Gefangenen, sich ihren Folterern unterworfen zu haben. Die komplexen Beziehungen zwischen unschuldigem Komplizentum und Bössigkeit, die Lessing so sorgfältig prüft, sind hier gelöscht” (18). Furthermore, critics denounce the notion of moral illiteracy and accuse the novel of “Geschichtsfälschung.” Adler characterizes the plot as “logisch unmöglich, historisch falsch und moralisch pervers” and condemns it as “Kulturpornographie, die so tut, als

habe sie neue moralische Einsichten zu bieten” (18). Adler’s critique of Schlink’s depiction of Hanna is particularly scathing:

In der ersten Hälfte des Buches, solange die ehemalige Wärterin den deutschen Klassikern lauscht, wird eine Verbindung zwischen ‘Kultur’ und ‘Barbarei’ suggeriert, in Gestalt einer ungewollten Persiflage auf die ‘Dialektik der Aufklärung’ von Horkheimer und Adorno. Später, im Gefängnis, hört sie moderne Literatur einschließlich Kafka und lernt selbst lesen, vor allem die Literatur der Lager, einschließlich Primo Levi. Hier wird der Leser eingeladen, an eine Läuterung der Frau zu glauben. Die Massenmörderin wird als virtuelle Heilige präsentiert, der Leser dazu angehalten, die heilende Kraft der Dichtung zu bestätigen. In Bernhard Schlinks dialektischer Kaffeestube scheint man tatsächlich den Kuchen behalten zu dürfen, während man ihn verzehrt: nicht nur ‘alle menschlichen Gebrechen’, sondern ‘jedes Verbrechen’ kann hier versöhnt werden. (18)

Willi Winkler (2002) reinforced the British intellectuals’ critique as he likewise accuses Schlink of trivializing Nazism and the Holocaust and harshly rejects particularly the portrayal of Hanna as an innocent victim:

Auf seine wenig subtile Art variiert Schlink das Klischee vom schäferhundliebenden und abends geigespielenden KZ-Kommandanten, indem er seine Hanna wenigstens nachträglich in das Reich der Dichter & Denker beruft. Die ehemalige Lageraufseherin ist nämlich Analphabetin, deshalb braucht sie den Vorleser. Weil sie nicht lesen konnte und die Entdeckung fürchtete, hat Hanna, armes Ding, ihre Laufbahn bei Siemens

aufgeben müssen und bei der SS Unterschlupf gefunden, wo ihre Leseschwäche nicht weiter auffiel. Man kennt sie doch, die brutale SS. Sowas nennt man am besten beim Namen, und der heißt Holo-Kitsch.<sup>40</sup> (16)

The harsh criticism was received with both agreement and indignation. Felicitas von Lovenberg (“Nachlese”) defends the novel in the *FAZ* by nonsensically arguing that “Schlink wurde zunächst gefeiert. Nun hat ihn doch noch eingeholt, was nicht zuletzt durch den Erfolg seines Romans überwunden schien: Das Diktum, daß nur ausländische Autoren frei über alle Aspekte der deutschen Vergangenheit verfügen dürfen” (n.pag.). Volker Hage (“Unter Generalverdacht”) vehemently rejects the critique in his *Spiegel* article and particularly attacked Winkler accusations as “verdreht”, and “höhnisch.” He disagrees on all points of criticism and simply explains the criticism as motivated by jealousy of the success: “Keine Frage, dass solche Reaktionen [...] auch mit dem immensen Publikumserfolg zu tun haben: Die Bücher von Grass und Schlink verkaufen sich bestens. Und literarischer Erfolg macht in Deutschland skeptisch.” Thomas Kleinfeld (2002) in turn, dismissed Haage’s accusation that the criticism is an outcome of jealousy and wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “Zum anderen ist ‘Neid’, wenn es um Bestseller geht, stets ein bequemes, nicht weiter begründungspflichtiges Argument, in dem sich der Kritiker der Kritiker zum Richter über deren Seelenzustand erhebt” (n.pag.).

It is interesting to note that the scathing reviews of the novel only emerged in 2002 when the *Opferdebatte* was in full bloom. The first phase of laudatory reviews emerged immediately after the novel’s publication in 1995 when German public discourse was still occupied with the new situation of the German unification and the *Opferdebatte*, which was largely (re)ignited by

<sup>40</sup> Winkler is however mistaken with respect to the fact that female camp guards like Hanna were members of the SS. The SS was, as Ruth Klüger memorably puts it in *weiter leben*, “strikt ein Männerverein” (146).

W.G. Sebald's *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in 1997, had not been generated yet. By 2002, the new sensibility for the ethical complexities involved in depicting Germans as victims contributed to this wave of negative responses to Schlink's novel. However, the belated criticism did not minimize its commercial success which culminated in its film adaptation in 2008.

### *The Vernacular Reception in Reader Responses*

In order to analyze how readers interpret the novel, I read *Leserbriefe* that had been sent to Bernhard Schlink. Schlink left his correspondence from 1995 to 1999 to the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach* which permitted me to look at the material after I had written permission to do so from Schlink himself. However, I was not allowed to take notes while reading the letters and was only allowed to select twenty letters which the archive would copy for me after I had received written permission from the respective author. Bernhard Schlink had only allowed me to read the *Leserbriefe* under the condition that I would send him all quotes I wanted to use and that only then would he decide whether to permit this. Despite these significant efforts of traveling to Marbach, spending three days reading through the many letters, and contacting twenty letter writers in writing to get their permission to receive copies of the letters from the *Literaturarchiv*, and even analyzing them in a detailed subchapter, I was not able to include any of the reader's comments from the letters. In the end, Bernhard Schlink refused to give me his final consent and I was therefore not allowed to either quote from or paraphrase the content of any letters and had to scrap the subchapter I had already written because it took him several weeks to inform me of his decision. I even had to give him written confirmation that I will not mention the content of the letters in my dissertation. (After all, he is a judge and law professor.) Hence, I cannot even convey his reasons for refusing the authorization because this necessitates referring to the content of the letters.

The only information I can legally disclose is that he has received a vast amount of *Leserbriefer* which were overwhelmingly positive. When I read Schlink's correspondence from 1995 to 1999 in the *Literaturarchiv*, I counted 151 letters from readers and only two of those were negative responses.<sup>41</sup> He received letters from men and women, from teenagers, from people of his own postwar generation and from the so-called *Tätergeneration*. Some school classes wrote to him in order to share their class projects or to ask questions about the novel. Overall, the amazingly positive vernacular reception resembles the official rave reviews in the media. Unfortunately, unlike in the case of *Anonyma*, I could not replace the unavailable *Leserbriefer* with postings to internet sites because in the mid-1990s, the internet was not yet a common tool for voicing opinions and only a handful of early reader reviews, posted before the public debate of 2002, are available on amazon.de and they only date back to 1999. Furthermore, the *Literaturarchiv* only contained letters sent to Schlink prior to the public debate generated by the critical reviews in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The next chapter therefore includes reader comments made in internet forums after the public debate in order to analyze if the vernacular reception remained positive or if readers likewise reviewed the novel more critically

#### *Reader Responses to the Feuilleton Debate*

The *Leserbriefer* analyzed here were sent to *Der Spiegel* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in response to Volker Hage's (2002) *Spiegel* article "Unter Generalverdacht," which vehemently defended the novel against the scathing critique published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.<sup>42</sup> Of the seven *Leserbriefer* published in both papers, six of those were infuriated by the negative

<sup>41</sup> I only counted letters written in Germany and excluded letters from abroad. However, Schlink did receive letters from all over the world. There may be even more letters since I probably did not see all of Schlink's correspondence on *Der Vorleser*. The *Literaturarchiv Marbach* had only recently received the materials and, hence, they were very unorganized.

<sup>42</sup> These *Leserbriefer* were published in *Der Spiegel* on April 22, 2002 and in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on May 16, 2002.

comments and only one letter supported the criticism. The six letters opposing the critique defended the novel and its author vehemently. Inge Naujoks (2002) even compares it with the Nazi book burnings, She writes in *Der Spiegel*: “Aber was sich die Dauer-Betroffenheits-Funktionäre jetzt zu den Büchern von Schlink, Grass, Forte und so weiter leisten, grenzt an Lese- und Denkdiktatur. Sind das die neuen Bücherverbrenner? Sie widern mich an” (n.pag.). Ivonne Bernard (2002) disagrees particularly with literary critic Willi Winkler and writes in the same paper:

Obwohl der erfolgreiche Roman noch immer nicht zu meiner Lieblingslektüre zählt, muss ich Willi Winklers Kritik vehement widersprechen! ‘Holo-Kitsch’ ist dort in keiner Passage zu finden, kein Holocaust-Opfer kann der ehemaligen KZ-Aufseherin Hanna Schmitz die Absolution erteilen, selbst der Protagonist braucht Jahrzehnte, um seinen Frieden mit Hanna zu machen; er schreibt als literarisches Ich das Buch als Therapie für die Schäden, die sie ihm zufügte. Warum bildet Herr Winkler sich ein, Vergangenheitsbewältigung in der deutschen Literatur im Keim ersticken zu dürfen? (n.pag.)

Likewise in *Der Spiegel*, Beate Nowack (2002) not only rejects the critique of exculpating perpetrators but either untenably conflates all victims – those persecuted and murdered in the Third Reich, German civilian victims at the end of and in the immediate aftermath of the war, and possibly even self-stylized victims like Schlink’s alter ego narrator – or only considers the latter two groups as victims:



Unzweifelhaft ist aber auch, dass nicht jeder Deutsche ein Nazi war. Weder Grass' *Im Krebsgang* noch Schlinks *Der Vorleser* verleihen den Tätern einen Glorienschein, sondern nur den Opfern eine Erinnerung. Kann es vielleicht sein, dass wir Deutschen selbst die größten Probleme haben, die Opfer aus den so genannten eigenen Reihen als Opfer anzuerkennen? (n.pag..)

The only *Leserbrief* that supported the critique was written by Heiner Lichtenstein (2002), an editor at the German public-broadcasting TV and radio station *WDR*, and published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He argues that the portrayal of a Nazi concentration camp guard as an illiterate is historically inaccurate since the majority of female (and male) guards were well educated and intelligent people. He asks:

Wieso konnte eine Analphabetin KZ-Aufseherin werden? Hat Schlink tatsächlich NS-Prozesse als Beobachter erlebt? Hanna Schmitz, die ehemalige Aufseherin, wäre kaum in die SS aufgenommen worden. Im Düsseldorfer Majdanek-Prozess gab es anfangs viele weibliche Angeklagte. Das waren keine einfältigen Frauen, wie Hanna eine gewesen sein soll. Schlinks Schilderungen von NS-Prozessen haben fast nichts mit dem tatsächlichen Ablauf solcher Strafverfahren zu tun [...] Jeremy Adler hat mit seinem Urteil Recht: 'Das Buch ist ein betrüblicher Kommentar zu unserer verkehrten Welt, dass dieser Reißer von einem deutschen Richter ausgebrütet wurde.'<sup>43</sup> (40)

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<sup>43</sup> Like Winkler, Lichtenstein however reflects and reinforces the apparently common but nevertheless mistaken notion that female camp guards were SS members.

All but one *Leserbrief* – which was written by a well informed journalist – rejected the criticism, defended the novel and its author, and adhered to their original opinion about *Der Vorleser*. While the corpus of seven letters is far too small to draw decisive conclusions, it seems that the enthusiasm and admiration for the book seems to be rooted deeply in vernacular German memory

### *The Novel in the Classroom*

*Der Vorleser* has become a canonical text in school curricula of several federal states in Germany. How school curricula suggest the novel be analyzed in the classroom is an interesting source for exploring what students are meant to learn about Germany's past and hence about official German memory of the Third Reich. Of the currently more than twenty teaching manuals, I analyzed eleven book-length studies that provide exemplary interpretations of the novel and didactic suggestions for classroom instruction.<sup>44</sup> Given the wealth of material, this analysis can only provide an overview, and rather than analyzing the individual books separately, a summary of the most striking findings follows. The analysis of the material will concentrate mainly on Hanna's status as perpetrator and/or victim and on the representation of Holocaust victims.

<sup>44</sup> Amazon.de generates about twenty publications of interpretations and/or instruction manuals for *Der Vorleser* and when searching for the keywords "Unterricht," "Vorleser," "Schlink" on google.de, there are about 111.000 results. I analyzed eleven teaching manuals: Breznay, Marta Elsholtz. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung der NS-Sünde. Interpretation am Beispiel Bernhard Schlinks Roman Der Vorleser*. Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009; Egbers, Michaela. *Interpretationshilfe Deutsch: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Freising: Stark, 2009; Feuchert, Sascha and Lars Hofmann. *Lektüreschlüssel: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005; Greese, Bettina and Almut Peeren-Eckert. *Einfach Deutsch: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000; Heigenmoser, Manfred. *Erläuterungen und Dokumente: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005; Köster, Juliane. *Interpretationen: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. München: Oldenbourg, 2000; Möckel, Magret. *Königs Erläuterungen und Materialien: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Hollfeld: Bange, 2007; Reisner, Hanns-Peter. *Lerntraining und Lektürehilfe: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Stuttgart: Klett, 2001; Reisner, Hanns-Peter. *Lektürehilfe: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Stuttgart: Klett, 2005; Schäfer, Dietmar. *Lektüre Durchblick: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. München: Mentor, 2000; Urban, Cerstin. *Blickpunkt. Text im Unterricht: Bernhard Schlink Der Vorleser*. Hollfeld: Beyer, 2006.

The teaching handbooks can be distinguished into those that primarily provide an interpretation of the novel, which are used by both teachers and students, and those which furthermore include didactic suggestions and concrete teaching materials, which are used only by teachers. Both types tend to focus on the plot structure, characters, style, and narrative strategies. Some materials also give information on the historical background but only very few discuss the meaning of *Kollektivschuld* and what that means for the *Tätergeneration* and the postwar generation of *Kriegskinder*. Interpretations of the novel usually highlight three points. The first is the relationship between Hanna and Michael, which is usually defined as a love story. The significant age difference of 20 years is played down. Only very few mention that German law considers sex with a minor a crime or discuss the relationship in terms of sexual abuse or the social tradition of sexual initiation of boys by older female servants.

The second main theme of the interpretations is the notion of guilt. Michael's guilt is discussed from two different perspectives. Some books concentrate on Michael's guilt as a member of the second generation and how this generation comes to terms with the past. However, only *Einfach Deutsch* discusses the second generation and its "zweite Schuld" which results from the self-imposed ignorance of not wanting to know about Nazi crimes (Greese, Peeren-Eckert 2000). Far more teaching manuals discuss Michael's guilt in regard to his behavior towards other characters, particularly towards Hanna. They argue that he betrayed Hanna by keeping to himself that she is illiterate since the disclosure of her secret would have saved her from lifelong imprisonment. All interpretations define Hanna's guilt on the basis of her role as a concentration camp guard. Merging such incomparable acts as Michael's decision to not disclose Hanna's illiteracy and Hanna's work as a concentration camp guard via the notion of guilt is both unethical and effaces more than it illuminates conceptually.

This latter discussion is closely intertwined with the third main topic of interpretation, Hanna's illiteracy. Almost all manuals explore illiteracy rather independently from the novel, e.g., they give information about illiteracy in contemporary Germany. They ubiquitously but no less questionably consider it a disability and discuss what it means to live as an illiterate, what kind of strategies they employ to hide their handicap. In addition, the materials offer exercises in which students imagine in roleplays and group work how illiterates live and feel. While this is certainly an interesting topic, some of the manuals ignore the dubious role of Hanna's illiteracy in *Der Vorleser*. As mentioned above, it serves to exculpate Hanna from her guilt as a concentration camp guard and to establish her as a victim of this supposed disability and as someone who was morally illiterate and thus not responsible for her (unspecified) crimes.

Furthermore, the teaching manuals reinforce rather than critique the dubious cliché of the novel that becoming literate and reading canonical German literature as well as Holocaust memoirs transforms Hanna into a morally better person which, as she realizes her crimes, results in her suicide. However, the exemplary interpretations refrain from exploring that Hanna's crime was supposedly the result of her illiteracy which thus serves to exculpate her. The manuals simply reverberate in passing rather than critically analyze the novel's untenable equation of moral awareness with literacy by citing the same passage: "Indem Hanna den Mut gehabt hatte, lesen und schreiben zu lernen, hatte sie den Schritt aus der Unmündigkeit zur Mündigkeit getan, einen aufklärerischen Schritt" (178). This passage declares Hanna as *unmündig* when she decided to become a camp guard and that she therefore cannot be held responsible for her actions. It implies that people who are educated, like the *Bildungsbürger* for whose insider benefit the passage is phrased to evoke the opening passage of Kant's essay "Was ist Aufklärung," are *mündig* and therefore act morally and ethically responsible, which in the

context of the Third Reich is a particularly untenable idea. Although the didactic books explain the obvious, that in the novel literacy signifies *Mündigkeit* and that this relativizes of Hanna's guilt, they do not explore, let alone critique, the ethical implications of this notion. The comment from *Lektüre Durchblick* is paradigmatic:

Während der Haft entwickelt Hanna ein Schuldbewusstsein. Grundbedingung dafür ist der Umstand, dass sie lesen und schreiben lernt und so an Hintergrundinformationen über den Holocaust gelangt. Dass sie sich umbringt, unmittelbar bevor sie entlassen werden soll, scheint dabei konsequent. (53)

The didactic suggestions proposed by the teaching manuals show a similar ignorance and complete lack of critical distance as the exemplary interpretations of the novel. *Lektüre Durchblick*, for instance, offers exercises with answer keys on 1. style and narrative strategies; 2. *Leitmotive*, including the odyssey, the dream, fire and water, heat and cold, (quite a few manuals discuss the meaning of *Leitmotive* in the novel); and 3. the fight between Hanna and Michael during the bike tour. All of these tasks not only ignore the core subject of the novel – *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by transforming both the narrator and even Hanna into a victim – but they also only emphasize the first and second part of the novel while ignoring the third and most ambiguous part, which represents Hanna's transformation as well as Michael's meeting with the survivor. And although *Königs Erläuterungen* does offer an exercise discussing Hanna's illiteracy, it is decontextualized from the plot of the novel and thus from its function to exculpate Hanna: "Entwerfen Sie ein Bild der Analphabetin Hanna! Wählen Sie eine der für

Hanna unter diesem Gesichtspunkt schwierigen Situationen aus und gestalten sie sie in einem Rollenspiel. Diskutieren Sie anschliessend in der Gruppe das Problem Analphabetismus” (99).

In their final chapters, the teaching handbooks and interpretations usually include a section about the novel’s media reception. Some manuals summarize newspaper articles and quote the most important paragraphs while others print several reviews in their entirety. Books published after 2002 offer both laudatory and critical reviews. While *Blickpunkt*, which was published in 2006, provides longer excerpts from eight newspaper articles and asks students to evaluate them with respect to their own interpretation thus providing them with the opportunity to engage with literary criticism, *Blickpunkt* provided only positive reviews. *Klett Lektürehilfe* does not provide any prior information on the media reception of the novel but asks students in a *Prüfungsaufgabe* to read Lawrence Norfolk’s scathing critique that *Der Vorleser* depicts Hanna as a victim and evokes pity and empathy for a perpetrator. Students are then given the following task “Stellen Sie den Aufbau und Argumentation des Textes dar. Setzen Sie sich vor dem Hintergrund Ihrer Kenntnis des Romans mit den zentralen Argumenten auseinander” (129). While it is important for students to analyze the novel critically and learn about the public criticism of the novel, it is problematic that the manual had never mentioned the controversy before. Not only are students thus tested on something that had never been discussed before but the exercise seems set up to incite students to disagree with the critique since few if any will be intellectually capable to fundamentally change the interpretation of the novel developed in the classroom during an exam.

By contrast, *Einfach Deutsch* and Juliane Köster’s *Interpretation* present more nuanced interpretations and guides for teachers. When Köster discusses Hanna’s illiteracy, she explains that the depiction of Hanna deviates from the stereotypical Nazi and incites the reader to

empathise with her but points out that “die NS-Verbrechen durch die Verknüpfung mit dem Analphabetismus eine Entschärfung erfahren” (51). Köster also critiques that, when Hanna learns to read, she not only becomes an avid reader but reads literature about the Holocaust and undergoes a moral transformation which results in her suicide. Köster considers both as unrealistic as she argues that illiterates who eventually learn how to read and write do not become avid readers and that ex-concentration camp guards do not undergo such moral transformations, for example, the former guard Hermine Braunsteiner continued to deny that she did anything wrong. Köster explains furthermore that the portrayal of Hanna during the trial as a scapegoat exculpates her and prompts the reader to feel pity and empathy with her: “Darüber hinaus erweckt gerade der Umstand, dass Hannas Analphabetismus vor Gericht keine Berücksichtigung findet und sie gegenüber den anderen Angeklagten die grösste Schuld und das härteste Urteil erhält, bei den Rezipienten die Forderung, den Anaphabetismus als entlasend zu berücksichtigen” (52). She mentions that some reviews criticized the combination of Nazi crimes and illiteracy because it “reduziert die Verantwortung der Täter und relativiert die Schuld” (53). Köster thus provides a critical interpretation which, unlike most other teaching manuals, reflects some of the post-2002 critique of the novel, particularly the transformation of a perpetrator into a victim.

Like virtually all teaching manuals *Einfach Deutsch* largely leaves out precisely this ethically and historically untenable core aspect of the novel as it only mentions in passing that reviews criticized Hanna’s illiteracy as exculpating her from her crimes and, hence, accused Schlink of relativizing the Holocaust. Worse, *Einfach Deutsch* even rejects this critique and rather considers the portrayal of Hanna a positive aspect of the novel. However, unlike any of the other teaching manuals and mode interpretations, *Einfach Deutsch* included a discussion not only

on collective guilt with regard to the perpetrator and postwar generation but also “was die Schülergeneration mit den Verbrechen der Generation ihrer Gross- bzw. Urgrosseltern zu schaffen hat” because there is “ein Vermächtnis der Furchtbarkeiten des Dritten Reiches auch für die dritte und die folgenden Generationen” (75). It is important that the personal relevance of this past is discussed in class and that teachers encourage students to engage in their own form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It is striking that only *Einfach Deutsch* discusses the meaning of the Nazi crimes, particularly the Holocaust, for the new generations. Although they are not accountable for the crimes, this past constitutes part of their national identity. As they have to rely on mediatized representations of German collective memory in the form of family anecdotes, photos, exhibitions and museums as well as literature and film for information about the past, school has the important task to fulfill of pointing out to students that they do have a responsibility in remembering this past and to enable them to become critical consumers of the ubiquitous representations of the Third Reich.

Not a single interpretation or teaching manual explores the dubious ethics and aesthetics of representing the Holocaust in a sex-and-crime story as “Holo-Kitsch” (Winkler 2002), in which the suffering of the Holocaust victims is largely effaced,<sup>45</sup> questions the negative portrayal of the two unnamed Holocaust victims and how this reinforces the reinterpretation of Hanna from perpetrator into victim, or contextualizes the novel in the *Opferdebatte*. In combination with the novel’s immense commercial and critical success in Germany and internationally, its adoption into the school curriculum in several German states, this indicates a very problematic turn in German collective memory towards exculpating perpetrators and relativizing the Holocaust.

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<sup>45</sup> Only Köster (2000) critiques this in passing when she writes that Schlink “die Gerechtigkeit für die Opfer hintan stellt” (54).



### *Student-Generated Websites*

Since teaching manuals and model interpretations only represent how a particular text is intended to be discussed in class, in order to see how this potential was actualized one needs to analyze the student reception of the novel. To explore how students interpret *Der Vorleser*, I analyzed student generated websites which were created between 1999 and 2008. On these websites students present class projects which include interpretations of the novel as well as short video or audio clips. For the following analysis, I include four student-generated websites<sup>46</sup> and I am primarily looking at how students perceive Hanna, whether as perpetrator and/or victim, particularly with regard to her illiteracy. The websites follow very clearly the same structures and cover the same topics as the interpretations and teaching materials discussed above which indicates both that teachers use the handbooks and that their interpretations remain in their uncritical realm. Both teaching manuals and student websites, summarize the plot of the different chapters, present schemata and diagrams explaining relationships between characters, the setting and timespan of events, and cover the same topics of guilt, Hanna's illiteracy, and the relationship between Hanna and Michael. All four websites follow the teaching manuals and

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<sup>46</sup> Research articles and teaching manuals stated that in the early to mid 2000s there was a wave of student-generated websites on *Der Vorleser*, however, most are expired by now. Hence, I could only find ten student websites. This might either be an indication that fewer classes discuss the novel or that students and teachers are less interested in posting their projects in the internet. Of the ten websites I analyzed, six were not relevant since they concentrated on issues not related with the topic, e.g., they present a video in which students re-enact scenes from the novel. In my analysis of the student reception, I included the following websites:

<http://www.christoph-schmidt.de/vorleser/content.php?action=home;>

<http://www.pestalozzi-gymnasium-unna.de/vorleser.html;>

[http://www.strittmatter-gymnasium.de/faecher/sprachen/deutsch/de\\_hahn.htm;](http://www.strittmatter-gymnasium.de/faecher/sprachen/deutsch/de_hahn.htm;)

[http://www.dreieichschule.de/deutsch/2008\\_09/der\\_vorleser/index\\_n.asp.](http://www.dreieichschule.de/deutsch/2008_09/der_vorleser/index_n.asp)

define the relationship between Michael and Hanna as a love story and neither notes that according to German law it does constitute sexual abuse.<sup>47</sup>

Like the teaching manuals, the student-generated websites discuss Hanna's illiteracy in rather general terms independent of its function within the plot. Students collect data about illiteracy in Germany today and examine what effects illiteracy has on one's life instead of looking at illiteracy in terms of Hanna's guilt. Students tend to evaluate Hanna's lifetime sentence as too hard and rather see her as not guilty or at least less guilty. The Jacob-Grimm-Schule in Kassel posted a project in which students were asked to take the role of either the defendant or the prosecutor at Hanna's trial and to write a closing statement. Of five student responses, three saw her as not guilty because, they argued, she was following orders and not following them would have meant severe punishment, even death. One of them was particularly striking:

Ich, Frau Schmitz Verteidiger, bin fest davon überzeugt, dass meine Mandantin, Hanna Schmitz, unschuldig ist. Meiner Meinung nach hatte Frau Schmitz keine andere Wahl anders zu handeln, schließlich wurde es ihr befohlen. In der Situation hätte jeder von uns auch alles getan was von uns verlangt wäre. Und ich bin mir sicher, dass niemand sein eigenes Leben in Gefahr gebracht hätte um ein anderes Leben zu retten. Und wenn sie sich dagegen gestellt hätte, was hätte es denn gebracht? Außer das es ihr Leben gekostet hätte. Zu den Verlusten eins mehr? Ich glaube das würde keiner von uns mehr wollen. Was aber vielleicht etwas gebracht hätte wäre, wenn alle sich dagegen gestellt hätten. Doch das hat niemand getan und ein Einzelner hätte das ganze niemals stoppen können.

<sup>47</sup> Ursula Mahlendorf likewise noted in her short analysis of student generated websites that "all saw the relationship of the woman and the boy as a 'love' story" and that "some did not notice, others down-played the age difference between the partners." (458)

Deshalb bin ich der Meinung, dass Frau Schmitz unschuldig ist. Sie hat nichts anderes getan außer ihr [sic] Job, und das tut doch jeder von uns heute auch noch. Wem wir die Schuld geben können ist der Nationalsozialismus mit ein System [sic], dass vielen armen und unschuldigen Menschen das Leben gekostet hat. Und niemand es mehr jetzt rückgängig machen kann [sic].

Apparently without realizing that he echoed the paradigmatic defense from the Nuremberg Trials, the student argues that Hanna was only following orders and that she did not have a choice, despite the fact that she did chose to become a camp guard. He thinks it was impossible to act differently because that would have meant to risk her life. It is highly problematic to exculpate Nazi crimes with follwing orders and to blame an abstract entity, National Socialism, rather than a perpetrator for the crimes. His interpretation evokes the conservative tendency of the 1950 and 1960s when West Germans tended to put all the blame on Hitler and the Nazi leaders, who were seen as the only ones responsible for the crimes. The final clause even seems to suggest that as the punishment of the perpetrators cannot undo the lost lives, it is therefore not necessary. This line of argument ignores the victims entirely and is ethically untenable. It is important to note here that this school project did not include any discussion of the historical circumstances which indicates the importance of discussing the history of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes when analyzing *Der Vorleser*. However, the fact that two student responses consider Hanna as guilty and that one even calls her a murderer who knew exactly what she was doing and the other argues that illiteracy is not an excuse for killing people, indicates the vast diversity of student responses to the same text and the same interpretation of it by the teacher.

The website of the Strittmater Gymnasium in Gransee presents a project in which the class was divided into two groups. Each group had to re-write Hanna's trial, but this time all participants knew that Hanna was illiterate. Each student was assigned a part – defendant, prosecutor, judge or journalist – and had to write a summary and evaluation of the trial. The result likewise indicates that students in the same class can come to significantly different conclusions. While one group sentenced Hanna to ten years, the second group only sentenced her to two years imprisonment. Both sentences seem lenient which reflects that students feel empathy and pity with the former concentration camp guard and seem to consider her illiteracy as a mitigating factor for her guilt as the novel dubiously proposes.

The Dreieichschule in Langen presented the results of a similar project. Students posted a video in which they reenact Hanna's trial. In this trial, Hanna's defendant pleads 'not guilty' and Michael appears as a surprise witness for the defense and explains that Hanna is illiterate. Hanna is sentenced to ten years in prison while her fellow camp guards, who received lesser sentences in the novel, get twenty years. The students explain Hanna's lesser sentence as follows: "Jeder soll nach der Wahrheit verurteilt werden. Und wäre es nicht ans Licht gekommen, dass sie Analphabetin ist, dann würde sie jetzt im Gefängnis sitzen für etwas, dass sie nicht getan hat." The students thus likewise accept the novel's untenable claim that Hanna's illiteracy exculpates her to some extent from her crimes.

The discussion of Hanna's guilt on the website of the Pestalozzi Gymnasium in Unna is the most dubious as it even begins with such a nonsensical question as "Ist Analphabetismus schlimmer als Kriegsverbrechen?" And the class project concludes with the statement that "Täter sind auch Opfer," which they leave without explanations or further discussion. Since their

interpretation consists in rather fragmented notes and quotes from the text, it is impossible to know how they arrived at this ultimate relativizing conclusion.

All four school websites thus exculpate Hanna from her crime. They tend to feel pity and empathy for her. Students minimize her guilt even to the extent of considering her innocent because her illiteracy did not leave her a choice. The novel thus generates moral indignation among the students for the unjust

life imprisonment of Hanna for a crime for which she did not have sole responsibility rather than for the crimes she committed. It is alarming that students do not understand that although Hanna was not the author of the report, she worked at a concentration camp, which included taking part in selections, and by deciding not to open the doors during the church fire, is responsible for the death of the women whom she watched being burned alive. Like the narrator Michael, the students empathise with Hanna rather than her victims and even consider Hanna a victim.

None of the projects reflect on the nonsensical metaphorical extension of Hanna's actual into moral illiteracy and her impossible transformation into a 'moral literate' when she learns to read and write. Furthermore, the Holocaust victims and their suffering are entirely omitted. Only two websites discuss the historical background but only in the abstract form of facts, numbers, and timelines. The suffering and even supposed victimhood of the perpetrator superceded that of the Holocaust and other Nazi victims in the student reception which leads to partially or even entirely exculpating a perpetrator.<sup>48</sup> None of the websites demonstrated empathy for the two survivor figures in the novel which reflects their unsympathetic portrayal in the novel. Teachers should criticize and compensate for this plot feature in the novel by emphasizing and discussing the fate of the real victims, the historical background of concentration camps and camp guards,

<sup>48</sup> Juliane Köster (1999) notes that in her own experience of teaching *Der Vorleser* students exhibit a strong tendency to empathize with Hanna at the expense of empathizing with her victims.

Nazi trials and the behavior and attitudes of the accused in order to clearly convey to students who the perpetrators and who the victims were and that, indeed, all of them were ordinary people. Likewise absent from the student websites are any reflections on the question what the subsequent generations should do with the knowledge of the Holocaust and how it impacts their national identity as Germans. None of the websites discusses the core question, namely, what the collective memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust means for today's students. Only one student from the Jakob-Grimm-Schule in Kassel asks: "Wie müssen wir heute, besonders als Nachkriegskinder, mit dieser Schuld umgehen?" However, this question is not discussed.

The websites show creative and well-organized projects, and it is evident that teachers and students spent much time on the project and on putting the sites together. However, the real problems and issues that arise in *Der Vorleser* are left out. Although these are student-generated websites, it is still the teacher who decides on what topics students have to concentrate and guides them in particular directions. After looking at the various websites, it is evident that teachers follow the published interpretations and teaching manuals since the structure, topics and exercises are very similar. They rather rely on ready-made material than their own critical judgement, which also seems to indicate that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to critique the novel.

#### *The American Film Adaptation of Der Vorleser*

*Der Vorleser*<sup>49</sup> was adapted into a movie, which was written by David Hare and directed by Stephen Daldry. Ralph Fiennes and Kate Winslet star along with the young German actor David Kross. It was the last film for producers Anthony Minghella and Sydney Pollack, both of

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<sup>49</sup> Since this chapter analyzes the German reception of the film, I will use the German film title rather than the American title *The Reader*.

whom died before the film was released. Production began in Germany in September 2007, and the film opened in German theaters on February 26, 2009. The film was nominated for several major awards, including four Academy Award and three Golden Globe nominations, and Winslet won an Academy Award for Best Actress, along with several other awards for her performance.

The film adaptation follows the storyline of the novel closely. Both book and movie are divided into three parts. The first shows the relationship between Hanna and young Michael, the second part concentrates on the trial, which Michael attends as a law student, and the last part focuses on Hanna's imprisonment, her suicide and the aftermath. Daldry succeeds in depicting the exceptional relationship between the boy and the much older woman in the first part due to the great performances of David Kross – who plays young Michael, awkward and insecure at first, then growing more and more confident during his affair with Hanna – and of Kate Winslet – who finds the right balance between seductress and the plain and reclusive woman who likes order and cleanliness. While both actors shine in their respective roles, Daldry delivers exactly what you would expect from a typical Hollywood movie. The film highlights the sexual component of the first section even more than the book. Wesley Morris (2008) criticizes in the *Boston Globe* that it over-emphasizes Hanna's sexuality at the expense of depicting her character: "The filmmakers are comfortable showing Hanna's sexual nudity when, really, we need proof of her moral nakedness." Like the novel, the film raises the question of whether it is appropriate to represent a Nazi perpetrator and the memory of the Holocaust according to the dominant popular culture plot paradigm of sex-and-violence. The idea of the sexual initiation by a former concentration camp guard led German journalist Rüdiger Suchsland ("Der deutsche Patient") to dub the film "Nazi-Porno."

Although the film remains true to the novel's main plot structure, there are some variations. It does not depict the events in chronological order but uses a frame narrative in which the adult Michael looks back to his past via flashbacks that switch between years and decades and which are rather confusing for a viewer unfamiliar with the novel. As the film does not employ voice-over narration, it excludes Michael's reflections and thoughts. The absence of a first-person narrator could have the positive effect of providing a direct access to Hanna, particularly her thoughts and emotions because readers of the novel see Hanna solely through Michael's eyes. However, while unlike in the novel, which is dominated by Michael, Hanna takes center stage in the film, this change incites audiences to empathize with her to an even greater extent than the novel, which invites a division of empathy between Michael and Hanna. Empathy with Hanna is further encouraged by adding a scene in which she listens to a childrens' choir in a church, which moves her to tears, and another scene, in which she struggles learning to read in prison with the help of Michael's tapes; her effort and drive make it difficult not to root for her. Although Kate Winslet portrays Hanna as an ambivalent figure, it is very difficult to associate this woman with a concentration camp guard. In fact, Daldry and Hare indicate in the *Filmheft*, which can be found on the movie's website at [www.dervorleser-film.de](http://www.dervorleser-film.de), that they deliberately opted to portray Hanna as more likeable than she is portrayed in the novel. Therefore they not only added scenes but also changed the dialogue between the Holocaust survivor and Michael so that she does not mention that Hanna was brutal as a camp guard and replaced the scene in which Hanna hits Michael with a belt with a slap in the face, which lacks the sado-masochistic connotations. In the *Filmheft*, the filmmakers argue that they portray Hanna in such a positive light to represent her as a diverse individual and to invite the audience to ask themselves how they would have acted in the same situation. However, this makes it even more



difficult to imagine her as the brutal camp guard. Daldry states, that “not everybody was a monster. They were your mother, your father, the baker, the priest or the teacher. It’s a debatable issue, but it seems to me that if you portray the people as not human beings, then you are letting the country off the hook” (*Filmheft Der Vorleser* 14). As such, he not only conflates perpetrators, followers and bystanders but also nonsensically argues that only such an exculpating portrayal of a perpetrator adequately conveys collective German guilt. The film thus incites the audience to empathize with a Nazi perpetrator and exculpate her from her crime to an even greater extent than the novel.

Hanna is exculpated at the expense of the Holocaust victims, whose suffering is effaced because while the audience hears about some of Hanna’s crimes in the trial scenes, like in the novel, she is not depicted as committing them. Despite the ubiquity of flashback scenes in the film, Daldry and Hare decided against using flashbacks to depict Hanna’s past as a concentration camp guard. In an interview (“Reading *The Reader*”), Daldry explains this decision by emphasizing that *Der Vorleser* is not about the Holocaust itself but about German memory of the event. This argument is rather questionable since Hanna is a former concentration camp guard who took part in the ‘Final Solution.’ Omitting the Holocaust from a film about the subsequent life of a camp guard is an ethically and historiographically problematic choice not least because the decision to not portray Hanna’s crimes and hence the suffering of the victims invites the audience to empathize with Hanna and not with her victims.

However, in the film Hanna does not read Holocaust literature after she becomes literate while in prison and thus does not follow the novel’s argument that she was a moral illiterate while committing her crimes. As Hanna does not come to terms with her past in the film in this unconvincing manner, it is difficult to interpret her suicide as a further self-imposed penance. The

film also departs from the novel because it does show the two survivors of the church fire as likeable characters and as individuals who show emotions when they are giving their testimony at the trial. And while the novel refers to the younger survivor only as “die Tochter,” in the film she is given a name, Ilana Mather. However, when Michael visits her in her upscale New York apartment, she is as reserved and unsympathetic as in the novel. Hence, the added scene in which she not only accepts Hanna’s tea tin but puts it next to the picture of her family, who perished during the Holocaust, is contradictory to her behavior toward Michael. The clearly symbolic gesture is ethically problematic because it suggests that the survivor forgave Hanna and may even indicate that she accepts Hanna as a victim, too, which relativizes the Holocaust.

The very end of the film shows another departure from the novel because the former ends with Michael getting back together with his estranged daughter Julia at Hanna’s grave and beginning to tell her the story, thus passing on his memories to the next generation. While the appropriateness of a father telling his daughter not only the story of his sexual initiation but an exculpatory portrayal of a camp guard is rather questionable and may indicate the problematic communicative memories about the German past generated in families, the film rather dubiously employs this closing scene as a positive gesture. However, as the film does not depart from the major plot line and characters of the novel, it is characterized by similar problems, most significantly the representation of the memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust via the paradigm of sex-and-violence, which is even further exaggerated in the film version. Likewise untenable in both media is the depiction of a Nazi perpetrator as a victim of circumstance who only became a concentration camp guard in order to hide that she is illiterate. Novel and film evoke empathy for a perpetrator in the audience while the suffering of the Holocaust victims is ignored. However, whereas the novel casts Hanna’s illiteracy by metaphorical extension as a

lack of moral intelligence, the movie refrains from suggesting that Hanna's crimes can be exculpated by this nonsensical excuse. While the decision not to include Hanna's dubious transformation into a morally conscious person was probably an attempt to make the movie less controversial and the character of Hanna more believable, without it, the illiteracy motif serves to a lesser extent to exculpate Hanna. Although the film thus changes some details from the plot of the novel, it likewise relativizes and trivializes the Holocaust. Instead of taking a firm stand and trying to transpose the moral problems and ambiguities of the novel onto the screen, the film exculpates a perpetrator and supports the highly problematic transition from the collective subject position of collective German guilt and responsibility for the crimes to the claim of collective German victim status.

#### *The Official Reception in Newspaper Reviews*

The film adaptation of Schlink's novel has been widely reviewed by both German and international critics. The German reception of the film reflects the division of opinion also evident in the book reviews. I examined 35 German reviews of which 11 largely refrained from evaluative comments, another 11 reviews were predominantly laudatory, and the remaining 14 reviews were primarily critical. Reviews are particularly criticizing the extensive sexual content in the first part of the film. According to Claudius Seidl's (2009) online review in the FAZ, "*Der Vorleser* fängt als Sexfilm an – und als Porno geht er weiter." However, critics also argue that the core problem is not the explicit sex scenes but the fact that the film evokes empathy in the audience with a perpetrator. Rüdiger Suchsland ("Der deutsche Patient"), for example, argues that "Wir haben Mitleid mit ihr, der Mörderin. Nicht mit ihren Opfern. Das ist der Grund, warum hier von Nazi-Porno und Revisionismus geredet wird, und viele das obszön finden. Und falsch ist es nicht." Jörg Häntzschel (2009) similarly writes in the *Süddeutsche* that the film "presst dem

Zuschauer mit unendlichem darstellerischen und inszenatorischen Aufwand Mitleid für die Massenmörderin ab, die sich in ihrer bundesdeutschen Zelle mühsam das Lesen beibringt. Dann aber lässt er ihn allein damit, wenn er beginnt, sich zu fragen, warum diese Frau ihre Haftstrafe nicht gründlich verdient haben soll. So verlässt man das Kino mit dem vagen Gefühl, emotional missbraucht worden zu sein.” Michael André (2009) goes even further and argues that Hanna is not only depicted as a victim but stylized to a heroine because she was sentenced to a lifetime in prison for something she did not do:

So gerät *Der Vorleser* [...] auf einen abgründigen Weg. Nicht die Opfer, nicht die Nachgeborenen, sondern eine Täterin steht im Mittelpunkt – und hat die Sympathien immer auf ihrer Seite. In der geschickten Emotionalisierung des Zuschauers wird Hanna in dem Augenblick zur Heldin, als sie die Verantwortung, die ihr von den Mitangeklagten untergeschoben wird, auf sich nimmt. Die schöne, schüchterne, freundliche Hanna wird im Zeugenstand zum Opfer, das auf das Konto der grimmigen, verhärmten, alten Aufseherinnen auf der Anklagebank geht.

Film critics also echo the critical notion of the book reviewers with regard to the function of Hanna’s illiteracy as the questionable means of exculpating her because, as Elmar Krekeler (2009) writes in *Die Welt*, Hanna is “keine durchschnittliche Nazi-Mörderin, sie ist eine wider Willen, eine aus Scham.” Michael André (2009) thus criticizes “dass es hier um eine Frau geht, die sich mehr dafür schämt, dass sie nicht lesen und schreiben kann, als dass sie 300 Juden auf dem Gewissen hat. Der Film tut sich schwer, solche Vorwürfe zu entkräften.” Hanna’s later effort to learn to read and write which prompts her eventually to engage with canonical literature

implies that she acquires moral literacy which enabled her to comprehend the magnitude of her crime. Dominik Rose (2009) considers this transformation implausible: “Dass die zu einem langjährigen Gefängnisaufenthalt verurteilte Hannah schließlich lesen lernt und durch die tiefgehende Auseinandersetzung mit den Kanon-Werken der Weltliteratur doch so etwas wie eine moralische Verantwortung für ihre Taten entwickeln kann, ist ein weiterer unglaublicher Kniff der Geschichte.” Michael André (2009) furthermore points out that Hanna’s illiteracy implies that one’s level of education corresponds to one’s ethical convictions, a dictum which was de facto contradicted by Nazism: “In der Figur der Analphabetin werden die Nazi-Gräueltaten mit mangelnder Bildung kurzgeschlossen. Dabei war es, Heiner Müller erinnernd, ‘Bildung, die nach Auschwitz führte’. Bildung, die das Streben nach Totalität und Selektion beinhaltet.” Sonja Vogel (2009) contextualizes Hanna in her *taz* article in a trend of depicting female perpetrators as abnormal:

*Der Vorleser* ist nur ein Beispiel für jüngere filmische Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Nationalsozialismus, in denen Täterinnen eine immer bedeutendere Rolle spielen und stets in eine unheilvolle Aura aus Verführung und Verbrechen gehüllt sind. Die Täterinnen sind schön, kühl und bestialisch, und nie fehlt der Verweis auf ihre mangelnde Zurechnungsfähigkeit [...] Weibliche Täterinnen aber werden nie als normal und nüchtern handelnd wahrgenommen, sondern immer als krank, maßlos und exzessiv. [...] Werden Täterrollen im Film mit Frauen besetzt, dient dies vor allem der Exotisierung von Täterschaft. In der *Vorleser*-Verfilmung ist es Hannas Analphabetismus, also eine Form kultureller Unfähigkeit [...] Da Hanna der Schriftsprache nicht mächtig ist, so wird suggeriert, sei auch ihr moralisches Bewusstsein geschädigt. Es ist also der soziale

Mangel des Analphabetismus, der Hanna für den Massenmord verführbar gemacht hat:  
Wie hätte sie es auch besser wissen können?

In addition to the manipulative incitement of empathy for a perpetrator, the exculpating function of Hanna's illiteracy, the improbability of her transformation into a moral being via canonical literature, reviewers criticize the added gesture when "der gealterte Michael Berg [...] Hannas letzten Gruß einer KZ-Überlebenden in New York [übergibt]. Die stellt die Teedose aus der Erbschaft der Täterin ausgerechnet neben das Foto ihrer ermordeten Verwandten" (Kilb "Aus dem Brunnen"). Many critics are concerned that the fascination with German victimhood indicates a transformation in collective memory toward a lessening of the crimes and a relativization of the Holocaust. Thomas Assheuer (2009), for example, writes in *Die Zeit*:

Tatsächlich geht es um etwas anderes – es geht darum, die Erinnerung an Auschwitz neu zu 'rahmen' und eine andere Geschichte, einen anderen Film über das Trauma zu legen. Die Barbarei wird nicht verdrängt, sie wird sogar ausdrücklich gezeigt; aber sie wird neu belichtet und mit einer anderen Klage überschrieben, der Klage über den Verlust der kulturellen Identität. Diese Klage mag ihr eigenes Recht haben; obszön wird sie in dem Augenblick, wo sie die moralische Schuld zum Verschwinden bringt und den Eindruck erzeugt, die Deutschen seien ebenso Opfer wie die Juden auch. Oder noch abstoßender: Wenn ihre Schuld angeblich darin besteht, reuige SS-Täter nicht mehr in die Gemeinschaft aufgenommen zu haben.

Sonja Vogel (2009) similarly argues that as the perpetrators disappear from German national memory, Germans are increasingly cast as victims: “Die Täterinnen und Täter verschwinden derweil mitsamt ihren Taten hinter einem Schutzwall aus Schuldunfähigkeit - zu Ungunsten differenzierter Darstellungen von Täterinnen. Schuld ist nun einfach niemand mehr. Und die Schoah wird so zu einer Katastrophe, die einem Unwetter gleich auch über die Deutschen kam.” This notion reminds Vogel of the 1950s discourse when Germans admitted little of their responsibility for the Nazi crimes but all the more talked about their own status as victims: “So tritt im *Vorleser* mithilfe einer Frauenfigur die Frage nach der Schuldfähigkeit an die Stelle der Schuldfrage. Dies erinnert fatal an die Schuldabwehrstrategien der [west]deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft – niemand konnte etwas gewusst haben, niemand hatte etwas unterschrieben. Herrschte etwa kollektiver Analphabetismus?”

While the critical reviews scathe the film for its revisionist transformation of a Nazi perpetrator into a victim, positive reviews, which do not acknowledge the criticism the novel received in 2002, do not criticize that the film incites empathy for a Nazi perpetrator rather than her victims but absurdly argue that the perpetrator is not getting the deserved sympathy. According to Sonja Vogel (2009), “die Kritik an der Vorlage scheint vergessen. Stattdessen heißt es nun, der Film nehme nicht genug Anteil am Schicksal der KZ-Wärterin Hanna Schmitz. Patrick Bahners, Feuilletonchef der *FAZ*, kritisierte, der erwachsene Michael Berg, Hannas früherer Liebhaber, verweigere ‘seiner zu lebenslanger Haft verurteilten ehemaligen Geliebten die elementaren Akte der Mitmenschlichkeit.’” Vogel is referring to Patrick Bahners’ (2009) article, in which he claims that it is not Hanna Schmitz but Michael who is guilty because he failed to reveal Hanna’s illiteracy during the trial. Bahners writes: “Michael Berg trägt sein Leben lang an einer emotionalen Schuld: Er hat während des Prozesses Informationen

zurückgehalten, die seine ehemalige Geliebte entlasten hätten. Damit nimmt er in Kauf, dass sie allein für etwas bestraft wird, das sie nicht allein zu verantworten hat.” Bahnners completely effaces Hanna’s guilt. He ignores not only that Hanna was a camp guard who took part in the ‘Final Solution,’ but also the Holocaust victims in his argument.

However, some laudatory reviews do refer to the criticism that the novel had received, but argue that the movie is more successful in telling the story than the novel. And many critics credit this to Kate Winslet’s performance. Andreas Kilb (“Aus dem Brunnen”), for instance, writes in the *FAZ*: “Einige Kritiker haben Schlinks Roman vorgeworfen, er wecke Verständnis für eine Nazi-Täterin. Das tut auch der Film. Aber Winslet schafft es, dass sie uns dabei zugleich immer unheimlicher wird. Das muss man einfach bewundern.” And Hanns-Georg Rodek (2009), who does not mention the criticism the novel had provoked, argues in *Die Welt* that *Der Vorleser* “erweist sich [...] als Film mit eminent europäischer Sensibilität, der in seinem Thema mehr Schattierungen von Grau entdeckt, als sich jener Gut/Böse-Ort namens Hollywood auch nur vorzustellen vermag. Der Schlüssel zu diesen Grautönen ist Kate Winslet, die verführerisch sein kann und abweisend, einsichtig und verschlossen, monströs und banal.”

Except for Andreas Kilb, critics disagree with the notion that the film invites empathy for and/or mitigates the crimes of a perpetrator. For instance, Walli Müller (2009) writes: “Suggeriert der Film Mitleid mit einer Täterin? Nein, er lässt nur den Gedanken zu, dass sie ein Mensch ist, kein Unmensch – was weitaus bequemer wäre.” The laudatory film reviews essentially echo the initial reviews of the novel, which applauded Schlink for portraying Hanna as a *Mensch* rather than an *Unmensch*, to use Müller’s terms. Critics who praise this approach usually argue that Nazi perpetrators were ordinary people like Hanna. Volker Mazassek (2009)



thus argues that *Der Vorleser* does not exculpate the perpetrators but rather provides clear answers to the question of guilt:

Daldry zeichnet Hanna Schmitz nicht als Monster in schöner Hülle, sondern als durchschnittliche Frau, die ohne groß nachzudenken und ohne moralische Bedenken ein Rädchen im Nazi-Getriebe wurde wie viele andere Deutsche auch. Damit wird nichts entschuldigt. Auf die Frage von Schuld und Sühne gibt der Film klare Antworten und er bleibt auf Distanz zu seiner weiblichen Hauptfigur, die ihre Gefühle weitgehend für sich behält.

However, Mazassek does not explain how the film provides an unambiguous indictment of Hanna, whom he misleadingly not only casts as a follower rather than a perpetrator when he terms her a “Rädchen im Nazi-Getriebe [...] wie viele andere Deutsche auch” but also dehumanizes and objectifies and thus implicitly conceptualizes as a amoral rather than an immoral entity. Thomas Klinghmaier (2009) even argues in the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that the movie manages to get the viewers to consider themselves as a perpetrator because it is easier to identify with a perpetrator who is depicted as an ordinary person:

Die Täter waren eben nicht alle und durch und durch Bestien, sie waren Menschen, die uns im Alltag nicht oder vielleicht sogar positiv aufgefallen wären. Und wenn sie uns so fremd nicht sind, wenn wir sie lieben können, dann hätten wir eventuell auch so handeln können wie sie. Bernhard Schlinks Roman und Stephen Daldrys Film erzählen davon,

dass die Psyche der Täter noch immer nicht ganz und gar ergründet ist und dass es darum kein Profil des Nichttäters gibt, das wir für uns in Anspruch nehmen können.

Jan Schulz-Ojala (2009) from the *Tagesspiegel* likewise dismisses the accusation that *Der Vorleser* calls for empathy with a perpetrator and argues that it is not Hanna but Michael for whom audiences are invited to feel sorry:

Manche Kritiker monieren angesichts der still ihr Urteil annehmenden und sich im Gefängnis tapfer mit Kassetten und Büchern selbst alphabetisierenden Hanna, der Film mobilisiere Mitleid mit einer SS-Mörderin. Und nennen den *Vorleser* gar in einem Atemzug mit jenen obszönen Täterverstehern, die etwa die verkrüppelte Biografie von Stasi-Observanten zum Absolutionsgegenstand machen. Doch sie übersehen dabei den entscheidenden Unterschied: Nicht mit der Täterin Hanna hat *Der Vorleser* Mitleid, sondern allenfalls mit dem Nachgeborenen – das Buch übrigens viel nüchterner als der Film.”

While Schulz-Ojala thus covertly admonishes a film like *Das Leben der Anderen*, which seeks to convey the complexity of a *Stasi* informant, he rejects the notion that *Der Vorleser* exculpates a Nazi perpetrator. This argument is not only historically and ethically dubious because it essentially equates the Third Reich and East Germany but also because it seems to cast the crimes of a *Stasi* informant as worse than that of a Nazi camp guard (to whom he falsely ascribes membership in the SS). Furthermore, Hanna’s illiteracy and its exonerating function in novel and film are entirely omitted.

Among the laudatory reviewers, Birgit Roschy (2009) is the only one to refer to Hanna's effort to become literate and her reading of canonical literature but she argues, without supporting this thesis, that "doch als sie im Gefängnis dank der besprochenen Literaturkassetten von Michael lesen lernt, erfährt sie durch ihr Bemühen um bürgerlich-zivilisierende 'Kulturarbeit' keine Absolution." She also approves of the fact that the film omits flashbacks to Hanna's crimes and thus the visualization of the suffering of her victims because supposedly "Hannas Persönlichkeit ruft eine unangenehmere Malaise hervor als das Entsetzen über nachgestellte Gräueltat der Lager." Hanns-Georg Rodek (2009) likewise argues in *Die Welt* that excluding flashbacks to Hanna's time as a camp guard is a positive aspect of the film adaptation. The film, he writes,

verzichtet auf eine Rückblende in das Konzentrationslager, wo Hanna als Aufseherin gearbeitet hat. Der Schrecken dort wird nicht vorgeführt, nur erzählt. Das ist ein doppelt konsequentes Vorgehen: Zum einen ist dies die Geschichte Michaels, der keinerlei eigene KZ-Erinnerung haben kann, zum anderen handelt der Film nicht von den Qualen der Umgebrachten, sondern vom Leiden der Nachgeborenen – und zwar nicht dem der Opfer-, sondern dem der Täterkinder. Das ist nicht zu verwechseln mit der 'Wir haben im Krieg aber auch gelitten'-Attitüde, die durch Fernsehfilme wie *Die Flucht* und *Dresden* hierzulande Verbreitung gefunden hat.

Rodek thus nonsensically casts Michael as the descendant of a perpetrator – when his father was at best a bystander – and argues, in line with the *Vaterliteratur*, that the German postwar generation constituted the victims of the Nazis, thus effacing the actual Nazi victims. He

also argues that excluding flashbacks is logical because Michael has no memories of Hanna's crimes. Rodek's argument, however, is illogical, because Hanna has memories of her crimes and they could thus have been represented in flashbacks because, unlike the novel, the film is not narrated from Michael's perspective. Rodek ignores the fact that if Hanna's crimes had been depicted via flashbacks rather than solely narrated at the trial, the exculpatory representation of Hanna would have been impossible. Rodek is right in arguing that *Der Vorleser* differs from the TV movies that cast German followers and bystanders as victims, however, *Der Vorleser* differs not only because it incites sentimental pity for the postwar Generation, rather than followers and bystanders, but also and especially because it goes significantly further in exculpating a perpetrator and recasting her as a victim, a notion absent from Rodek's argument.

Overall, laudatory reviews either efface the criticism both the novel and the film adaptation received or they oppose it, however, they are largely unable to support their dubious theses with evidence from the film. Unlike the negative reviews, they do not critique the mitigating function of Hanna's illiteracy and of omitting the visual representation of her crimes but praise the depiction of Hanna as an ordinary person because this supposedly prompts viewers to ask themselves about their own potential roles in Nazism. And last but certainly not least, they reject the notion that the film seeks to transform Germans collectively into victims. Nevertheless, the laudatory film reviews were not as uncritical as the book reviews from 1995. Even if a critic likes the movie in general, there were usually some details s/he disagrees with. For instance, positive reviews criticize the added scene in which the survivor puts Hanna's tea tin next to the picture of her murdered family because they consider this as a gesture of forgiveness, which was not granted in the novel. Furthermore, reviewers disagree with the movie's frame narrative, which ends with Michael and his daughter standing at Hanna's grave. Critics argue that this adds

a meaning to the movie that is not apparent in the book because it suggests closure while the novel leaves many questions unanswered which reviews consider one of the strengths of the book. The more critical discussion of the film adaptation may reflect the fact that film reviewers are aware of the criticism the novel received in 2002 and of the discussions in newspapers and other media about the *Opferdebatte* about the depiction of Germans as victims.

### *The Vernacular Reception in Viewer Responses*

In order to analyze how audiences reacted to *Der Vorleser* and to explore whether and how their opinion relates to the official reviews, I sought to analyze comments by viewers. However, since neither film production companies nor newspapers archive letters from viewers, I had to rely on letters published in newspapers and on internet sources, particularly reviews or comments posted in internetforums of movie websites and internet blogs, and responses from viewers to the online versions of newspaper reviews.<sup>50</sup> As the novel was wellknown because it was a bestseller and taught in school classes, there was significant interest in the movie in Germany. Of the 115 reviews written by viewers, which included both shorter comments and longer discussions, eight responses were neutral, 37 were negative and seventy responses were positive. These numbers indicate that the film was more positively received by the audience than by the newspaper critics and that the positive vernacular reception of the film echoes that of the

<sup>50</sup> I analyzed 1) the review section on amazon.de to the DVD of *Der Vorleser* [www.amazon.de/product-reviews/B002D5LUPE/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_all\\_helpful?ie=UTF8&coliid=&showViewpoints=1&colid=&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending](http://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/B002D5LUPE/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_helpful?ie=UTF8&coliid=&showViewpoints=1&colid=&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending) (accessed December 1, 2009); 2) the discussion at [www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/83546-Der-Vorleser/Gastkritiken.html](http://www.filmstarts.de/kritiken/83546-Der-Vorleser/Gastkritiken.html) (accessed December 1, 2009); 3) the discussion at [www.moviepilot.de/movies/der-vorleser/comments](http://www.moviepilot.de/movies/der-vorleser/comments) (accessed December 1, 2009); 4) the discussion at [www.choices.de/forum.php?id=122859](http://www.choices.de/forum.php?id=122859) (accessed December 1, 2009); 5) comments to Hans-Georg Rodek's (2009) article "Der Vorleser überzeugt trotz Hochglanz-KZ" at [www.welt.de/kultur/article3159478/Der-Vorleser-ueberzeugt-trotz-Hochglanz-KZ.html](http://www.welt.de/kultur/article3159478/Der-Vorleser-ueberzeugt-trotz-Hochglanz-KZ.html) (accessed December 1, 2009); 6) comments to Tobias Kniebe's article "Bedeutsame Berührungen" at [www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/50/459689/text/](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/50/459689/text/) (accessed December 1, 2009); and 7) one letter to *Die Zeit* from March 9, 2009 by G. Labedzki who reacts to the article "Deutsches Reinemachen" by Thomas Assheuer in *Die Zeit* from February 2, 2009.

novel. Most viewers know both the film and the novel. In both negative and positive comments, the film's extensive and explicit sex scenes are predominantly criticized as overemphasized and a viewer with the username empty<sup>51</sup> (2009) even called the film a "Softporno." The relationship between Michael and Hanna is largely well perceived and positive comments praise the outstanding acting performances, particularly of Kate Winslet and mainly credit the actors for the movie's success. In general, reviewers evaluate the film on the basis of categories like suspense and action, actors' performance, character development, and credibility.

For my argument, it is important to examine how viewers evaluate *Der Vorleser* with regard to how Germans are depicted and how it treats the German collective memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Of the 115 reviews, only 35 mention the Holocaust and/or the depiction of perpetrators and victims and/or related issues and hence my analysis of the reception will concentrate on these reviews. Of these, 20 commentators see the movie as an adequate depiction of the Holocaust. They reject the criticism that *Der Vorleser* exculpates a perpetrator and/or argue that the movie is not about the Holocaust. In contrast, twelve comments support the official criticism the novel and the movie have received and take issue with the film's treatment of the Holocaust and its victims. The remaining three comments undifferentiatedly reject all filmic representations of the Holocaust and the Third Reich, for instance, a user named Adds (2009) calls the constant coverage of the *Hitlerzeit* "nervig" and another user, Hansinglück (2008), considers movies like this "Nazischeisse."

Reviews who argue that the treatment of the Holocaust is adequate emphasize – and thus agree with director Stephen Daldry – that *Der Vorleser* is not a Holocaust movie. Miss Sophie (2009) even argues that "für mich ist das kein Film über den Nationalsozialismus, sondern ein

<sup>51</sup> Internet users get user names in order to stay anonymous. These names sometimes ignore spelling and upper/lower case rules and other regulations. In this dissertation, I quote the original usernames as found on the respective Internet forums.

Film über persönliche Schuld” and phobie five (2009) likewise argues that it is essentially irrelevant for the plot line that Hanna is a former concentration camp guard:

Das Drama besteht nicht darin, dass 300 Juden bei lebendigem Leibe verbrannt wurden. Es besteht auch nicht darin, dass Hannah [sic] deshalb zur Hauptschuldigen wird, weil sie zu stolz ist, ihren Analphabetismus einzugestehen [...]. Der Film dreht sich um ein(!) verhunztes Leben und zwar um das von Michael und dessen Problem sind nicht die NS-Verbrechen, sondern die Art und Weise, wie sie plötzlich mit seinem eigenen Leben in Kontakt treten. Insofern besteht auch das Drama des Films in erster Linie darin, dass der Protagonist mit der schwer zu verkraftenden Tatsache klar kommen muss, dass seine große Liebe eine eiskalte Mörderin ist. Die Tat an sich ist dabei eher nebensächlich, Hannah [sic] hätte genausogut ein anderes furchtbares Verbrechen begangen haben, das nichts mit Antisemitismus zu tun hat, und die Geschichte würde nicht anders funktionieren. Insofern sollte man den Film nicht versuchen als Holocaust-Drama zu verstehen.

While the movie does indeed not focus on the Holocaust or its victims, one of its two main characters is a Nazi perpetrator, who played a vital part in the ‘Final solution’ and hence the Third Reich and the Holocaust play an important part in the movie. It is precisely because of the ‘Holocaust aura’ that the novel and the film received so much attention as it lays claim to being a highbrow rather than a popular novel. If Hanna were simply an ‘ordinary’ criminal, the kitsch aesthetics would have been more immediately apparent. Hence, the fact that Hanna is a former concentration camp guard is the most important detail in *Der Vorleser* as both film and

novel claim to tell a story with greater relevance than the love and sexual initiation of a minor by a criminal. It is only because of Hanna's past that the claim can be made that novel and film explore German collective memory of the Nazi past and the struggles of the postwar generation to come to terms with it.

Vernacular reviews reject not only the idea that *Der Vorleser* is about the Holocaust but also the notion that the film evokes sympathy for a Nazi perpetrator. Sharlih (2009), for instance, writes: "Ich sehe jedoch nicht, daß [sic] der Film Sympathien für die Aufseherin erzeugt. Die kann nur jeder in sich selbst erzeugen. Ich jedenfalls empfand diese Symphatien nicht, wohl jedoch Betroffenheit darüber, was das für normale Menschen waren, die solches begehen oder begleiten konnten." Many viewers disagree with the criticism that Hanna was depicted as a victim. Biggi (2009) thus states: "Hanna ist und bleibt die Verbrecherin, da gibt es nichts dran zu deuten und das hat der Film auch gut rübergebracht. Sie verkörpert die meist gehörte Meinung, dass sie nur ihre Pflicht getan hat und lehnt jede Verantwortung für ihr Tun ab." The majority of reviewers also reject the notion that Hanna receives a postmortem absolution, for example, kubrick\_obscura (2009) argues that

und so fällt es natürlich der KZ-Überlebenden schwer Hanna eine Absolution zu erteilen. Stellvertretend ist eine Vergebung der gesamten deutschen Schuld nicht möglich. [...] Der Film entwirft die Aussage, dass manche Taten nicht vergeben werden können, aber verspricht Linderung in dem Moment, in dem Michael seiner Tochter alles erzählt. Das Weitergeben des Erlebten an die nächste Generation ist die einzige Form der 'Absolution' die möglich ist.



dAShEIKO (2009) similarly argues that the film does not exculpate perpetrators: “Ansonsten überzeugt der Film als anspruchsvolles Kino für mündige Bürger. Man kann durchaus darüber diskutieren, was der Film uns sagen will. Eine von Gegnern vielzitierte Universalentschuldigung für Nazitäter ist die Geschichte definitiv NICHT! Vielmehr müssen wir uns (ALLE) damit abfinden, dass nicht alles schwarz oder weiß ist.”

Most viewers welcome the tendency that the film portrays a perpetrator as an ordinary woman and not according to stereotype. Sharlih (2009) thus notes:

Ich sehe gerade das feinsinnig nuancierte und beklemmende [sic] in dem Film eben darin, daß [sic] diese Verbrecher Menschen waren wie ‘Du’ [sic] und ich, keine Monster. Das macht ja das Entsetzliche und Warnende erst deutlich, daß Menschen, die auch Gefühle wie Liebe erwecken und empfinden konnten, die vielleicht liebevolle, Geschichten erzählende Väter waren, Massenmord meinten, wenn sie nach dem Frühstück sagten: ‘So, Papa geht jetzt mal arbeiten’. Das Buch wirft ein sehr notwendiges Licht auf diese Verbrechen und den nachkriegszeitlichen Umgang damit, INDEM es diese Person [sic] als Menschen zeichnet. Denn auch wir sind Menschen und wären womöglich in dieser Situation nicht besser gewesen.

Moviegoers thus praise the film for emphasizing the life of a Nazi perpetrator because they believe that by inciting empathy with Hanna viewers will consider that they may have acted similarly in her position. Ray (2009) thus similarly writes:

Durch die zuerst ganz alltägliche Beziehung, die natürlich von Emotion geprägt ist, selbst wenn die Beziehung ungleich verläuft und Hanna bestimmt, während Michael ihr wie so üblich in diesem Alter verfallen ist, gelingt eine außergewöhnliche Art und Weise der Vergangenheitsbewältigung und ebenso eine ambivalente Sicht durch die Privatheit, die beide verbindet und eine menschliche Sicht auf die Täterin ermöglicht. Daher empfinde ich gerade den Kritikpunkt, dass die Geschichte zu einer Identifikation mit schuldigen Tätern der NS-Zeit zwingt, den grossen Verdienst des Films. Der Täter hat ein menschliches Gesicht und kann nicht abgetrennt vom eigenen Ich als diese unmenschliche 'böse Nazi' Bestie gesehen werden, die man leicht zu verurteilen kann. Gerade in der Möglichkeit einer Identifikation gelingt doch eher eine adäquate Aufarbeitung im Sinne vom Erkennen eigener 'dunkler' Anteile, ein Punkt der in der Vergangenheitsbewältigung eher zu kurz kommt. Man beschränkt sich aufs Verurteilen und auf die Distanz.

The viewers who wrote laudatory reviews of the film thus largely argue – mistakenly, I believe – that *Der Vorleser* asks the audience to accept rather than exculpate individual and collective German responsibility for the crimes. Thus Stefan Christmann (2009) points out:

*Der Vorleser* ist ein emotionaler Film, der uns zum Nachdenken zwingt: über den Umgang der Nachkriegsgeneration mit der Schuld ihrer Väter und Mütter. Er richtet aber auch das Brennglas der Geschichte auf die gemeinsame Schuld und betrachtet ein Einzelschicksal. Wie ist es, wenn ein geliebter Mensch unermessliche Schuld auf sich geladen hat? Aus diesem Dilemma zwischen persönlicher und menschlicher Ebene gibt

es zukunftsgerichtet nur einen Ausweg: Dass sich Geschichte nicht wiederholen darf und der Film mahnt uns, dass wir alle Verantwortung dafür tragen.

While the positive reviews claim that the movie exhibits an appropriate treatment of German history, which critical reviewers disagree with, the critical stance towards the Nazi past, for which there cannot be any absolution, is shared by both laudatory and critical reviewers and could thus be taken as a core feature of vernacular German national memory. In contrast to those twenty comments that praise the film, twelve reviews criticize it harshly. They emphasize that the movie is indeed about the Holocaust and consider its incitement of empathy with Nazi perpetrators inappropriate. Karls Carstens (2009) even argues that *Der Vorleser* engages in “Holocaust Leugnung.” And lonesome.traveller (2009) argues that “hier wird nur eins; Geschichte missbraucht, wenn nicht vergewaltigt, Kasse gemacht mit braunem Hintergrund auf Kosten der Opfer. Das ist einfach nur wiederlich!” Reviews furthermore critique not only that the death and suffering of the Jewish victims is marginalized but also that, as Enash (2009) writes, “Lena Olin mimt in der letzten Szene noch eine hartherzige reiche Jüdin, was sie ebenso pflichtbewusst wie überflüssig tut. Ziemlich die antisemitischste Figur, die ich in den letzten 10 Jahren in einem Mainstream-Film gesehen habe.”

The main point of criticism is, however, that the film evokes empathy for a perpetrator because she is essentially transformed into a victim. lonesome.traveller (2009) argues that the film masks the horror of the Holocaust in order to trivialize German guilt and responsibility: “Muß [sic?] man eine so schnulzige Verfilmung abliefern die Grauen und Schuld absolut in den Hintergrund drängt, gar ausklammert und durch aberkitschigen Schnulz völlig maskiert/verharmlost? [...] ich weiß wirklich nicht warum man eine KZ-Aufseherin so ‘Mitleid

heischend' auf die Leinwand bringen muß [sic?] und so quasi für eine Art 'Generalamnestie' sorgt, ob bewußt oder unbewußt." The critique of Hanna's transformation into a victim is linked to a critique of the role her illiteracy plays in this exculpatory portrayal. Ansi (2009) thus writes

Die Mängel an Schlinks Werk sind so eklatant, dass es auch dem Film nicht gelingt diese auszublenden. Dem Roman muss nicht nur Geschichtsrevisionismus vorgeworfen werden. Völlig unglaublich werden Vorlage und Film, wenn es um die freche Argumentation der Geschehnisse und Entscheidungen geht. Da darf der Analphabetismus erhalten, um menschenverachtendes Handeln im KZ zu rechtfertigen [...] Zum Glück wird dem Zuschauer aber, nach entfallenen ewigen Traktaten Schlinks in der Buchvorlage, noch ein unverschämtes Happy End geboten - die Resozialisierung, Heiligsprechung und Erlösung der weiblichen Hauptfigur. Hanna Schmitz lernt zum Ende hin im Gefängnis lesen und dadurch wird sie von aller Schuld befreit und komplett geläutert - Gratulation!

Jack O'Neill (2009) goes even further and argues that not only Hanna is exculpated but even Germans at large:

Zu allerletzt ist da noch eine Sache, um die man in der Bewertung nicht drum herum kommt. Ich meine die Einstellung des Filmes zur Vernichtung in den Konzentrationslagern. Es ist mir klar, dass es in der Figur der Hanna Schmitz liegt, welche Entscheidung sie trifft, doch sich wegen Analphabetismus mehr zu Schämen [sic?] als für die Ermordung von hunderten Menschen, ist indiskutabel. Denn am Ende ist

die Hauptbotschaft des Filmes jene, die den Deutschen der Nazizeit eine Absolution erteilt, die etwas von der Endlösung gewusst haben.

According to galo (2009), *Der Vorleser* uses a female perpetrator since viewers are more likely to empathize with women as they are traditionally considered victims rather than perpetrators:

Soll ich wirklich Mitleid für sie haben, weil ihr Ego so gross ist, dass sie die ganze Verantwortung nimmt, nur weil es zu peinlich ist zuzugeben, dass sie nicht lesen und schreiben kann? Sie hatte Glück, dass sie nicht direkt nach dem Krieg hingerichtet wurde, was sie sicherlich verdient hatte, und ist mit lebenslanger Haft davongekommen. Keine Frage, wenn es sich irgendwann herausstellen würde, dass Eichmann eigentlich eine Frau war, müssten wir nicht lange warten bis zum 'Die arme Eichmann - sie war nur ein Mensch mit einer traumatischen Kindheit' Film.

The critical reviews unanimously reject the film's tendency to cast German as victims. According to Volker Weiss (2009), "hinter allem steckt, mühsam in pseudoethische Reflexionen verpackt, reines Selbstmitleid: die Deutschen als Opfer. Vielleicht ist das generationsbedingt, aber mir waren Schlinks Arbeiten immer unsympathisch und ihr Erfolg suspekt. Alles zu behäbig, zu gefällig und letztendlich voll clever verpackter Ressentiments" Buster Keaton (2009) similarly argues that the success of novel and film is due to the emphasis of Germans as victims and the fact that this claim is increasingly acceptable in collective German memory even to the extent of casting a perpetrator as a victim:

Mir jedenfalls ist es bis heute schleierhaft, warum *der* [sic] *Vorleser* zu so einem Welterfolg hat werden können, und ich vermute, dass es in erster Linie das Nazi-Holocaust-Schuld-Thema ist, das fasziniert [...] Vielleicht ist es sogar gerade das Fade und Flache, das dem brisanten Thema so viel Raum gibt, die leise und doch so ungeheuerliche Andeutung, dass man mit einer Nazi-Täterin Mitleid haben könnte. Noch in den 80er Jahren wäre der Autor deswegen womöglich zur Unperson erklärt worden, und ein bekannter Politiker wurde wegen weit weniger ketzerischen (sondern vielmehr sehr viel tiefgründigeren und konstruktiveren) Äußerungen deswegen zum Teufel gejagt.

While the negative reviews, which tended to be more emotional than the positive comments, thus critique the fact that the film invites empathy with a Nazi perpetrator and uses illiteracy to exculpate Hanna from her crimes, the laudatory reviews praise that Hanna is depicted as an ordinary person rather than a stereotype, which supposedly incites audiences to ask themselves what they would have done in Hanna's situation. Nevertheless, while the positive reviews argued that the movie's topic was not the Holocaust itself but rather German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, they did not engage in historical revisionism but accepted collective German guilt and even Hanna's guilt as a given and rejected collective German victimhood. A comment from G. Labedzki's letter (2009) to *Die Zeit*, which reacts to Thomas Assheuer's (2009) article "Deutsches Reinemachen" in the same paper, in which Assheuer had argued that *Der Vorleser* seeks to dispose of the burden of the Auschwitz guilt and implied that Germans do not want to deal with their responsibility for the past, may well reflect the dominant collective German memory of the Third Reich and the Holocaust:

Traumata zu verdrängen und den persönlichen Vorteil zu suchen ist menschlich, ein Großteil des deutschen Volkes, alle Eliten eingeschlossen, taten es während des Nationalsozialismus, mit den wohlbekanntem Folgen. Die Kritik, der Film wolle nun einen Schlussstrich unter Auschwitz ziehen, mag berechtigt sein, berücksichtigt aber nicht die Wirklichkeit, wonach die meisten Deutschen sehr wohl bereit sind, sich weiterhin mit dem Trauma Auschwitz auseinanderzusetzen. (n.pag..)

### *The Film in the Classroom*

The problematic *Begleitbücher* or *Erläuterungen* developed for teaching the novel could also be used for didactic suggestions in teaching the film. Given that there are so many exemplary interpretations and teaching materials on the novel and that the film adaptation only premiered in Germany in 2009, only one booklet on how to use the film in class has been developed. The official movie website [www.dervorleser-film.de](http://www.dervorleser-film.de) provides the *Filmheft – Materialien für den Unterricht* which teachers can download. However, the website does not provide a forum for teachers to discuss how they used the material in their classrooms.

The *Filmheft* introduces the movie with a rather long plot summary, which is followed by the first “Arbeitsanregung,” a group work activity, in which students compare the beginning and end of the film with the novel. Students are only asked to make a list of differences but not to examine what the differences mean for the plot of the film and the novel. The second part of this task focusses on the film’s ending, in which Michael is about to tell his daughter about Hanna. Students have to create a dialogue between Michael and his daughter in which they discuss why he has been silent so long about his relationship with Hanna and anticipate how his daughter might react to it. While it is questionable whether it is appropriate for a father to relate his own

sexual initiation to his daughter, this exercise also focuses on Michael's relationship to his daughter rather than the one more prevalent to the plot between Michael and Hanna and thus has only limited value for understanding the core ethical problems in the film, especially before students are introduced to critical interpretations of the exonerating portrayal of Hanna.

The following exercise, entitled "Vor dem Kinobesuch," asks students to look at the movie poster, some film stills, and the trailer and to discuss their expectations about the film plot, and is designed to introduce students to the film. However, the sequencing is again nonsensical because it presumes that students have neither read the *Filmheft*'s own plot summary, and also not read the novel because otherwise they are already familiar with the plot. Given the novel's bestseller status and the fact that it was taught in the schools of several federal states, this activity, which is appropriate for other films, makes little sense for the adaptation of a bestselling novel.

The next chapter, entitled "Hintergrundinformation," gives some information about the novel, how the idea for the film evolved, and how the movie was made. It is followed by the task that students should imagine that they are the film director and have to cast actors for the roles of Hanna and Michael. As students not only have to characterize the two figures in order to find the best fitting cast but also to compare their own characterizations of Hanna and Michael with both those of the movie and the novel, and explore what the differences mean for the development of the story, it can incite a critical discussion of the two main characters. However, it requires that students are familiar with both the film and the novel and thus contradicts the fact that for the preceding tasks students should not know the novel. Presuming teachers have figured out themselves how to integrate the reading of the novel and the viewing of the film, as there are no suggestions for this in the *Filmheft*, the exercise engages students to explore how the two



characters are presented differently by the different media. However, this task may also remain on the surface of formal differences between novel and film and again does not explore the ethical complexities of transforming a perpetrator into a victim that are at the heart of the novel and the film adaptation.

Chapter “Filmisches Erzählen und Gestaltungsmittel” focuses on the film’s structure and narrative strategies and students are asked to compare them to those of the novel and examine how these changes affected the meaning and message of the film in comparison of the novel. However, the answers can already be found in the preceding sections, which not only list the differences between the novel and the film but also the intention of the director for these changes. Hence, if students have read the sections, they do not have to come to their own conclusions.

The Chapter “Zwiespältige Charaktere” describes Michael, Hanna, Michael’s professor and the Holocaust survivor whom Michael visits in New York. When discussing Hanna’s character, the *Filmheft* points out that the film accentuates Hanna’s positive features even more than the novel because director Stephen Daldry’s intention was to emphasize the human side of the perpetrators. Hanna’s victims, the survivor Ilana Mather, who is called only “die Tochter” in the novel, is described by the *Filmheft* as Hanna’s antagonist who denies her absolution when she does not accept Hanna’s money. The *Filmheft* ignores the fact that whereas Hanna is cast as a character who invites empathy, the survivor is presented in a negative light and hence the argument that the survivor has the important role of transmitting the moral message that the movie does not support any kind of reconciliation between victims and perpetrators seems rather unconvincing:

Mit Ilana Mather jedoch bietet der Film eine klare moralische Position durch das unmissverständliche und radikale Urteil aus der Perspektive eines Holocaust-Opfers, das die erlebten Schrecken nicht verzeihen und vergeben kann. Dass der Film jede Form von Versöhnung vermeidet, war bei seiner Entstehung stets großes Anliegen aller an der Produktion Beteiligten. (17)

The next chapter, which is entitled “Thematische Anknüpfungspunkte – Aufarbeitung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit,” analyzes Michael as a representative, who is caught in the dilemma of the second generation between “verstehen und verurteilen” in the first section on “Kollektivschuld – Generationenkonflikt – Liebe.” The second section, “Individualschuld – Hanna als Täterin” emphasizes that, unlike the novel, the film refrains from transforming Hanna into a ‘moral literate.’ While she learns how to read and write, however, she does not come to terms with her past by reading camp literature but rather remains in a “moralischem Vakuum” (20). The third section, “Analphabetismus – Hanna als Opfer,” explores Hanna’s illiteracy and underlines that it supposedly does not exculpate Hanna from her guilt. Nevertheless, Hanna is described as a victim and by referring to her as “ein Opfer ihrer selbst” (21) essentially cast as a victim like the Holocaust victims, who were also victims of Hanna. The fourth section, “Michael als schweigender Mitwisser,” discusses Michael’s guilt. The last chapter, “Buch, Drehbuch und Film vergleichen – Erzählperspektive, Erzählsituation und Erzählstruktur,” essentially reiterates the formal comparison from the earlier chapters.

Following sections “Kollektivschuld – Generationenkonflikt – Liebe,” “Analphabetismus – Hanna als Opfer,” and “Michael als schweigender Mitwisser” respectively, the *Filmheft* offers a section of “Impulsfragen für eine Diskussion.” The first set of discussion questions asks

students if it is possible to have a relationship with someone who committed a serious crime. The second set of questions encourages students to discuss if it is possible to live a normal life if those who you love were involved in terrible crimes. The last set of questions invites students to debate whether one is responsible for the actions of loved ones and whether Michael is guilty for keeping quiet during the trial and for loving Hanna. Despite the fact that sections two and three focus on Hanna as perpetrator and victim, all questions concentrate on Michael's experience, thus effacing the core ethical problems of transforming a perpetrator into a victim and inciting empathy with a camp guard in audiences. The *Filmheft* also lacks contextualization of film and novel in the *Opferdebatte* about the problem of defining Germans as victims as this context is not even mentioned in passing. However, students should know about these tendencies in order to be able to critically approach *Der Vorleser* and the depiction of Germans as victims, in general. Furthermore, students should be given more background information on the problematic role of the postwar generation in the *Vaterliteratur* in which they, like Michael in the novel, cast themselves as victims at the expense of the actual victims who are largely erased from the generational conflict. Exercises, discussion questions, and particularly the chapters provided by the *Filmheft* do not encourage critical interpretations of the movie as it focuses on relating the intentions of the moviemakers. While the *Filmheft* does provide some insights into how the movie was made and what intentions the filmmakers had, as a teaching handbook it is not sufficient.

### *Der Vorleser and German Collective Memory*

Both film and the novel were very well received by critics and readers/viewers. Literary critics raved about the novel immediately after its publication in 1995 and it was not until 2002 that the novel was criticized for its treatment of the Holocaust and for casting a Nazi perpetrator as a victim and inciting empathy with her rather than her victims in audiences. Many readers, however, remained true to their enthusiasm about the novel. Even after negative reviews were published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, they abided by their original positive opinions about *Der Vorleser* and defended the book against any criticism. The film version, which was released in Germany in 2009, received mixed reviews from movie critics and although it is apparent that the enthusiasm for *Der Vorleser* was decreasing, positive viewer responses far outweighed critical ones.

Teaching material for the novel is widely available in both book form and online. However, teaching manuals often ignore the important ethical issues and neglect discussing the novel in terms of coming to terms with the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. The same tendency can be seen in student-generated websites which indicate that students tend to perceive Hanna as a victim and at the same time lose sight of the suffering of the Holocaust victims. The same deficiencies of effacing the core problems at the heart of the novel and the film, i.e., the transformation of a camp guard into a victim and the invitation of the audience to empathize with her rather than her victims, also dominate the *Filmheft*.

However, although *Der Vorleser* was widely praised in newspaper articles, teaching materials, student-generated websites, and viewer/reader responses, it is striking that revanchistic and/or revisionist comments that Germans were primarily if not solely victims rather than

perpetrators, followers, and bystanders in the Third Reich and hence rejections of any collective German responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism are absent.

Although particularly responses from viewers and readers welcomed the opportunity to discuss a German perpetrator and many were uncritical of both the transformation of Hanna into a victim and the negative portrayal of the two Holocaust survivors, audiences did not try to minimize and relativize German guilt and responsibility but took it as a given and advocated the significance of remembering the Holocaust. However, the readiness of readers and/or viewers and also many literary and film critics to accept and even rave about such an ambiguous story, in which a Nazi perpetrator is exculpated from her guilt and transformed into a victim, the Holocaust is misused to impose an aura of significance and respectability onto a kitsch-sentimental tale of sex-and-violence, and where the suffering of the Holocaust victims is largely ignored, is alarming. It suggests that there is a tendency to empathize with the supposed suffering of a perpetrator than with her victims in both vernacular and official German memory.

Schlink's treatment of the Holocaust is revisionist in its apologetic whitewashing of the past by transforming a perpetrator into a victim and its negative portrayal of Holocaust survivors. The departure from condemning Nazi perpetrators to stressing their human side and empathizing with them is untenable as it minimizes their crimes and constitutes a step towards exculpating them, a notion that clearly entails historical misrepresentation.

## 5. Depicting Germans as Bombing Victims in Roland Suso Richter's *Dresden*

Television has become the dominant medium for depicting German suffering. Recent TV programs have represented flight and expulsion, the bombing of German cities, and the hardships of life after the war in both documentary and fictional formats. The following chapter analyzes the made-for-TV movie *Dresden* (2006), which narrates the Allied fire bombing of the city of Dresden, and its official and vernacular reception. After conceptualizing the newly created genre of the so-called *TV-Event Movie*, I will analyze the two-part film with regard to its depiction of German wartime suffering and how film reviewers and audiences interpret the representation of Germans as victims of the Allied fire bombings. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the didactic potential of the *Filmheft*, which is designed to help teachers incorporate *Dresden* into classroom discussions about the Second World War.

### *teamWorx and TV-Event Movies*

Recent German history has been widely disseminated via the televisual genre termed *TV-Event Movies* in Anglified German. This newly created genre was pioneered by teamWorx production company, which was founded in 1998 and is headed by producer Nico Hofmann. teamWorx has become one of the most important television makers in contemporary Germany, and, according to their press release (“teamWorx Television”), they are “europaweit Marktführer im Bereich Event-Produktionen.” *TV-Event Movies* focus almost exclusively on 20<sup>th</sup>-century German history, and particularly on the Third Reich, the GDR, and West German terrorism. Among the best-known productions are: *Stauffenberg* (2004), a teamWorx TV-production for the ARD, which portrays the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. The two-part mini-series *Die Sturmflut* (RTL, 2006) narrates the flooding of the city of Hamburg in 1962. *Mogadischu* (ARD, 2008)

depicts the hijacking of the Lufthansa plane. And in 2008, in the wake of the approaching 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of unification, the ZDF screened *Das Wunder von Berlin* which is set in East Germany in the fall of 1989. In 2010, Sat1 will air the two-part production *Go West – Freiheit um jeden Preis*, which tells the story of two young East German men who attempt to flee to West Germany in 1984. *TV-Event Movies* are often screened to coincide with historical anniversaries or current debates and trends in terms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Hence, it is not surprising that teamWorx made use of the debate about Germans as victims, too. Since 2005, the company around Nico Hofmann produced four made-for-TV movies (*Die Luftbrücke*, Sat1, 2005; *Dresden*, ZDF, 2006; *Die Flucht*, ARD, 2007; *Die Gustloff*, ZDF, 2008; and *Vom Glück nur ein Schatten*, ZDF, 2010) portraying German suffering during World War II.

*TV-Event Movies* are fictional stories contextualized in historical events, i.e., they dramatize historical incidents in order to meet the audience's desire to consume history as entertainment. teamWorx prides itself to focus on Germany's recent past which prompted journalist Marcel Rosenbach (2005) to write in *Der Spiegel* that they engage in "filmische Vergangenheitsbewältigung" (152). This new genre is very successful with large audiences not only because it presents history and current debates and concerns in an easy to digest and entertaining format but also because it follows the generic standards of Hollywood movies. As the name 'teamWorx' indicates, the company emulates Steven Spielberg's company DreamWorks. As Jan Mojito – whose companies EOS Entertainment and Beta Film regularly support teamWorx's projects – puts it, "we will be the DreamWorks of Europe" (qtd. in Meza 2006). Melodrama, a regularly employed narrative convention in Hollywood films, is the most dominant genre in teamWorx's *TV-Event Movies*. Hofmann sees the melodrama as a means to make history accessible for a wide audience, including the younger generations: "Wo bisher

didaktisch, schuldbeladene Verkrampftheit herrschte, ist nun Emotionalität erlaubt. Geschichte [wird] so für ein breites und auch für ein junges Publikum greifbarer” (qtd. in Wormald 4).

By following Hollywood paradigms, *TV-Event Movies* achieve “cinematic value” (Ebbrecht, “Docudramatizing History” 50), which means that they are not significantly different from a movie shown in a cinema. Furthermore, like their Hollywood role model, teamWorx uses high-tech special effects, visual effects and/or audio effects for its productions to enhance the impression of realism and historical authenticity and to intensify the emotional experience of the audience or, as Lothar Mikos (2003) puts it, they increase “the sensual, visual and auditory impression of reality” (241). Since these special effects, echo those in cutting-edge action movies, the *TV-Event Movies* also appeal to the coveted younger viewers. However, as Ebbrecht critiques, while digital effects raise the films’ “event character,” they do not improve the value of the film’s historical information (“History, Public Memory” 230). The *TV-Event Movies*’ cinematic value makes them not only popular with a German audience but also attractive for the international market. Many of these TV productions have been shown internationally – *Dresden*, for example, was sold to 95 countries – and have won awards at both national and international film festivals.<sup>52</sup>

Another important reason that the films are so commercially successful is their so-called event character. Well-known actors, who are sometimes cast in several of these films make them attractive for an audience. Next to high profile advertising campaigns and aggressive promotion, teamWorx also creates a media event around the broadcast (Ebbrecht “History, Public Memory” 230). *TV-Event Movies* are accompanied by other television genres, such as documentaries and historical reports that explain the historical background in more detail, discussion groups (often

<sup>52</sup> See the teamWorx website for a list of awards and prizes:  
[www.teamworx.de/jart/prj3/teamworx/main.jart?rel=de&content-id=1175124158761&reserve-mode=active](http://www.teamworx.de/jart/prj3/teamworx/main.jart?rel=de&content-id=1175124158761&reserve-mode=active)



comprised of historians), shows that depict the making of the movie, and/or interactive websites. By using high-profile advertising campaigns and turning a made-for-TV movie into a media event, teamWorx creates a hype around their products and strives to create must-see TV, i.e., “Programme, über die Deutschland mehrere Tage spricht” (qtd. in Wormald 2). Due to their ability to reach such a large audience, which turns TV-Events into “history for millions” (Butzek 22), they constitute “a kind of popular history lesson for the audience” (Ebbrecht, “Docudramatizing History” 50) and thus play a crucial role in constructing collective memory.

However, *TV-Event Movies* are a double-edged sword. The immense popularity with the audience, the awards and prizes, and the international success speak in their favor and is proof that teamWorx ably manages to satisfy a desire among consumers they generated in the first place. According to Andrew Wormald (2009), “on the one hand it may appear that teamWorx are using mass entertainment features [...] to illuminate German histories and bring these large topics to as wide an audience as possible, forging a synthesis between art and ratings, between populist cinema and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (2). On the other hand, Wormald notes that teamWorx simply generates media products that sell and that they actually exploit particularly the Nazi past for maximal profit. He concludes that these two viewpoints cannot ever truly be resolved because “rather both and neither are correct” and that Hofmann’s production company employs “entertainment strategies to get funded and to ensure a wide audience and yet attempt[s] to deal with serious history, for the purposes of illumination and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*” (5). However, I will argue in the discussion of *Dresden* that in teamWorx’s productions the negative aspects prevail. While the films make history accessible and interesting for a large audience, including the younger generations, it is the very use of conventions of mass entertainment that makes it possible to reach such a high number of viewers and the emphasis on

populist entertainment generates a distorted view of history. They only create the illusion of depicting history in an objective and authentic way. Like filmic representations in general, *TV-Event Movies* can make history come alive but they take liberties with historical facts for the sake of inventive storytelling (Kaes 113-114) and are always inherently interpretations rather than accounts of ‘as it had really happened,’ in Ranke’s famous phrase. Like all historical narratives, films are selective in what they depict and what not, present the fictional characters and the historical events in a certain way, and incite certain reactions in the audience. The audience is not aware of these processes and the danger is that viewers will take this popular culture interpretation of the past as an objective account because, like realist media generally, popular culture products seek to remain invisible as media. In other words, television and film hide their own constructedness to make the viewer believe that the depicted events mimic what really happened, or as Winfried Fluck (2003) puts it, filmic representations simulate “an unmediated directness of representation” (214). Thus, many viewers forget that they are watching a constructed reality and take the filmic representations as authentic.

Ebbrecht (“Docudramatizing History”) argues that *TV-Events* offer only a stereotyped version of history that avoids active engagement with the audience and does not require viewers think critically about the past, especially about its moral ambiguities and contradictions. David. F. Crew (2007) calls this type of television “history light,” whose major features are to be “gripping and emotional” (129). *TV-Event Movies* employ historical events and adjust them to the entertainment needs of the audience, i.e., they use familiar genres, particularly melodrama, which are easy to follow and allow viewers to engage in strong emotional responses to their collective past. Triggering the spectator’s personal memories of the depicted events and their emotions entails that viewers are apt to remember the fictional stories much better and longer

than the facts that were presented to them in course of their education, in museums, memorial sites or in newspapers.

In the case of *TV-Event Movies* focusing on German suffering during World War II, it is particularly important to pay attention to how these popular media interpret Germany's past. While it is laudatory that German television attempts to explore recent national history generally and particularly such controversial topics as German civilian suffering during World War II, it is crucial to analyze how Germans are represented. However, this is a slippery slope. It is hard to find the right balance between emphasizing German crime and guilt for millions of Nazi victims and depicting the suffering of the German civilian population during World War II. I will demonstrate with respect to *Dresden* that *TV-Event Movies* focusing on German suffering do not accomplish this balance as they overemphasize German victimhood. As in all *TV-Event Movies*, those focusing on the suffering of German civilians at the end of the war, filmmakers embed a fictional personal story in the historical events and thus fulfil the audiences' desire to merge personal memories with official memory (Ebbrecht "Docudramatizing History"). As they hide the fact that filmic representations only simulate the past and claiming that they bring history to life, viewers take the filmic representations of *TV-Event Movies* largely at face value. This reality effect is intensified because many of the films incorporate archival footage and the distinctions to the fictional scenes are often intentionally difficult to make out. *Dresden*, for example, incorporates black and white photographs and newsreel footage without clearly demarcating it from the fictional plot line. All of these historical references are employed to establish a false claim of authenticity and to give *Dresden* documentary quality. However, *TV-Event Movies* focusing on German suffering show a falsified, trivialized picture of the Nazi followers and bystanders by depicting them predominantly as bombing victims while neglecting to

contextualize their victim status within the context of the Third Reich. In other words, they obscure previous individual or collective guilt and the collective status of Germans as the perpetrator nation, and mention the Holocaust and other mass killings only in passing, if at all. The specific context of the Third Reich is thus dehistoricized when represented as melodrama. However, not only is Holocaust suffering largely omitted but Holocaust images are misused to depict German suffering. Ebbrecht notes that “these emblematic images lose their ambiguous status, become icons of a new historical narrative and evoke an emotional response from the audience” (“History, Public Memory” 230). This use of images conflates the suffering and victimization of German civilians with that of Holocaust victims into a dubiously ahistorical brotherhood of victimhood while at the same time effacing the prior subject positions of Germans, which constitutes a revisionist interpretation of the Nazi past.

#### *The Bombing of Dresden as a Televisual Event*

Director Roland Suso Richter’s recent ZDF two-part mini-series *Dresden*, one of a number of major television projects produced by Nico Hofmann’s teamWorx company with the support of the television mogul Jan Mojto, was broadcasted on March 5 and 6, 2006. The *TV-Event Movie*, which had cost over 10 million Euro, the most ever spent on a German television production at that time, had an audience of 12.7 million viewers on its first night, which constitutes 32.6% of the viewing public – and 11.3 million viewers on its second night. The melodrama is set in the last months of the war. It tells the story of Anna Mauth, who is working as a nurse in a hospital headed by her father in Dresden. Shortly before her planned wedding to a young doctor, she meets the English bomber pilot Robert Newman, whose plane was shot down and who is hiding in the hospital’s basement. Anna discovers him and decides to help Robert and, of course, the unlikely couple falls in love. The story of the difficult and dangerous romance

between the German nurse and the British bomber pilot is the prelude to Dresden's destruction and constitutes the plot of the first part. In the second part, events not only reach a climax after Anna's father and fiance discover her affair with the British pilot, the couple is also caught off guard by the fatal bombing attack on Dresden that leaves the city in ruins and has to fight for its survival in the inferno that befalls the city.

The use of the genre of melodrama is omnipresent in *Dresden*. The mini-series represents a social conflict through a love story. As Andrew Wormald (2006) points out, the focus on relationships and family and the role of women as the dominant force is indicative of the genre of the melodrama. Furthermore, he indicates that the device of a love triangle, such as that between Anna, Alexander and Robert, and the extensive use of coincidence and chance, like when Anna and Robert are reunited during the chaos of the bombing night, are characteristics of melodramas. However, the *ZDF Jahrbuch 2006* characterized it predominantly as an anti-war movie and only secondarily as a melodrama when describing it as an "Antikriegsfilm mit melodramatischem Kern." In its quest to appear as historically accurate as possible, archival footage is interspersed into the fictional narrative of *Dresden*. The hybridization of newsreel footage and dramatic reconstructions creates the illusion of historical authenticity. Paul Cooke ("*Dresden*") points out that the use of documentary footage manipulates the viewer into believing that even the fictional scenes portray non-fictional reality. Not only does a scene using archival black and white footage of the destroyed city from 1945 precede the fictional scene of Anna and Robert reunited amidst the ruins but the latter scene is likewise shot in black and white, creating the illusion that this sequence was likewise taken from documentary footage. As another device to increase the pseudo-authenticity of the depicted events, filmmakers used special pyrotechnic, visual, and audio effects for the reenactment of the bombing of Dresden and

the following inferno and computer-generated images to recreate scenes that were not possible to produce in a studio.

The broadcasting of *Dresden* on March 5 and 6, 2006 was preceded by extensive promotion and advertizing campaigns. In addition, the two-part series was flanked by several programs that had the function of drawing attention to the historical topic, i.e., the bombing of Dresden. One night before the broadcast of the film, the ZDF showed a program on the making of it, which highlighted the high end special effects. Guido Knopp's two-part documentary *Der Feuersturm* (ZDF) was screened February 28 and March 7, 2006. Furthermore, shortly before the broadcast of *Dresden*, the actors discussed the film on the ZDF Talkshow *Johannes B. Kerner*. *Dresden* has won several awards, including the *Jupiter 2007* and the *Deutschen Fernsehpreis*, and was sold to international TV stations, including the British Channel 4. For Hans Janke ("Dresden sold to UK"), vice president of programming at the ZDF, the fact that *Dresden* has found its way onto British television, was especially important: "The fact that *Dresden* has got onto British television has symbolic importance. After all, it certainly couldn't be taken for granted that a German television film confronting this historical war-time disaster, which seeks neither to erase Germany's blame nor justify the inferno, would be shown there or here. In fact *Dresden* is contributing to critical and self-critical reflection on our history in both countries. That is a special mark of distinction and the culmination of the extraordinary success of an extraordinary film. ZDF has every reason to be proud." Günther van Endert (2006) from the film editorial department at the ZDF likewise points out that the filmmakers wanted to produce a balanced story and that therefore both British and German historians served as advisers. He notes, "*Dresden* setzt ein Zeichen für die deutschen Opfer, aber lässt nie einen Zweifel daran, wer letztendlich die Schuld für diesen Angriff hatte: Der von den Nazis mit aller Brutalität in die

Welt hinausgetragene Krieg kehrte mit den britischen Lancaster-Staffeln lediglich in die deutsche Heimat zurück.”

### *Germans as Victims in Dresden*

The following analysis explores whether the filmmakers really accomplished this difficult task of depicting German suffering while at the same time emphasizing that Germans were first followers, bystanders and perpetrators and thus without reverting to a revisionist perspective. The discussion will focus on how *Dresden* constructs victims and perpetrators, i.e., if the film can avoid painting German civilians largely as victims and the British soldiers primarily as perpetrators, and on the depiction of Jewish victims and the Holocaust.

The film opens with a sequence of archival black-and-white newsreel footage of Dresden before the bombing which is juxtaposed to the voice-over of Hitler declaring total war and excited Germans cheering him on which is followed by Arthur Harris, the commander of the RAF, words: “There are a lot of people who say that bombing can never win a war. Well, my answer to that is that it has never been tried yet. Germany [...] will make a most interesting initial experiment.” It is established that Nazi Germany started the war, and that the bombing of German cities could be a necessary means to end it. However, Harris’ comment that Dresden is an “interesting experiment” dehumanizes the inhabitants of Dresden. Additionally, the black-and-white images of Dresden, which are accompanied by melancholic music, do not show Germans as supporting the war with their hands raised to the Hitler salute but ordinary civilian life. Cooke sees this beginning sequence as establishing Germans as victims of “both a megalomaniacal leader, and, perhaps more fundamentally, of a cold and vengeful allied campaign” (“*Dresden*” 284). This impression is further reinforced by the next scene, which is set in a German hospital. The main characters Anna and her fiance Alexander operate without being

able to use any anesthesia on a German soldier who was severely wounded by a bullet and screams in pain. After the archival footage of beautiful Dresden and its innocent inhabitants, who are cast as innocent bystanders who will soon become victims, the first fictional image thus depicts another German victim, a suffering soldier.

The film juxtaposes the plot line around the melodramatic love triangle in Dresden with the contemporaneous scenes in the British military camp that lead up to the bombing of Dresden. On the surface, these scenes give the impression of a balanced account as they explain the military reasons for attacking the city. On the one hand, the audience learns that it was a difficult decision to bomb Dresden. Pilots and high ranking officers even questioned it. As Crew (2007) notes, even Arthur Harris, who was colloquially known as “Bomber” Harris and “Butcher” Harris, is not portrayed as a man who liked destruction for its own sake. Harris explains the military necessity as follows: “The last German troops have left Warsaw. The Russians are breaking through everywhere in the East [...] The Germans will mobilize everything to stop them on the Oder. The 6th SS Panzer Army which caused us such great difficulties in the Ardennes is being moved into central Germany. Stalin expects our help [...] We must disrupt the supplies to the German Eastern Front.” And when the bomber pilots meet for the briefing for the upcoming mission they hear a similar explanation: “[Dresden] is of the highest value for the German defense against the Russian advance under Marshall Konev. In the center, there is a Gestapo headquarters, a munitions factory, as well as a poison gas works. The city is full of German troops who are to be thrown onto the Eastern front.”

However, during the scenes in the British camp, the audience also learns that this was the official explanation and that the decision was also based on political strategies. At the pilot briefing, the officer further explains that this mission is important in order to show the Russians



that the British Ally is still part of the game: “It seems that the Russians do not have a high opinion of the Royal Air Force’s work. It is about showing them what Bomber Command is capable of. Good luck lads. And bomb the city till it burns.” The impression that destroying the city of Dresden serves not only the purpose of military tactics is further strengthened by the following dialogues. Saundby, the second-in-command, dares to question the strategy to win a war by air strikes and counters Harris’ explanation as follows: “There are people who say Germany is slowly being over-bombed. We are in danger of inheriting a completely destroyed country.” Harris in turn invokes the notion of revenge when he argues that the Germans brought that on themselves and responds: “The Germans wrote the rules [...] The sooner the war ends, the fewer people will die.” In a later scene, Saundby is approached by an officer who likewise questions the bombing and asks: “Do you know Dresden? I was there once, sir. Before the war, as a student. And it is the most beautiful city I’ve ever seen, sir. I don’t understand why we ...” Saundby’s face shows silent understanding and agreement and his response implies that the goal is at least as much political as military: “Churchill promised Stalin back in August 1942 that he would destroy every building in every German city.” When the pilot steps away, the audience sees how Saundby gazes at a newspaper caricature that shows Churchill and Stalin. While Stalin hits a Swastika with a hammer, Churchill, who is holding a bomb under his arm, only stands by and passively looks on. The words underneath the caricature read: “Do not let him do the job alone.” The conversations among the British military men indicate that the decision to bomb Dresden was thus also based on political power struggles between the Allies, in particular between Churchill and Stalin.

That Churchill’s plan to “destroy every building” was meant literally becomes clear when the bomber pilots get ready for departure. After studying the flight instructions, William – the

pilot who is Robert's friend – detects that he is not going to bomb important military targets but Dresden's old city. However, another pilot reminds him that he is not in the position to question this decision: "Dresden is a city near the front, William. We are not politicians. We are airmen and we are carrying out our orders." The fact that William rejects this decision is further emphasized when he and his co-pilot, Donovan, fly towards Dresden. When Donovan rants about the Nazis: "The pigs down there. Grill Nazi pigs," William tells him to shut his mouth. Even when the co-pilot explains his hate and anger with the death of his sister: "My sister burnt to death in Coventry. I'm not shedding any tears for those bastards down there," William just replies: "Get the hell back to your position." While Donovan's stance indicates that German bombers had attacked British cities first, William reminds us that it does not matter where the bombs fall, they kill civilians, including women and children. Crew (2007) argues that the scenes in which some British pilots question the bombing of Dresden but ultimately fulfill their orders preempt the accusation that the RAF takes on the role of the perpetrator and because this "may perhaps make it easier for Germans to believe that these 'good men,' like their own 'good men,' were victims of their leaders" (123). The film thus seems to reflect the 1950s West German notion that ordinary people were predominantly victims and that only the leadership constitute perpetrators, only does *Dresden* expand this notion from Germans to the British to exculpate the bomber pilots and solely blame Churchill and, to a lesser extent, Harris. The discussions in the British military camp whether the bombings would really help to win the war evoke the impression that they were not based on justifiable military reasons but on political power struggles between Stalin and Churchill, The destruction of Dresden is thus established as militarily unnecessary and the German civilians killed during the air raid are cast as innocent

victims. Nevertheless, the perpetrators are not the bomber pilots, who are represented as ‘good men,’ but the British political and military leadership.

The filmmakers sought to create a balanced view of the events because “allen gemeinsam war klar, dass *Dresden* eine enorme politische Verantwortung als Thema in sich trägt” (*Filmheft Dresden* 5). This necessitates that Germans are not solely depicted as victims. While at the film’s beginning, we hear a cheering crowd when Hitler declares total war and subsequently see newsreel footage of German air raids on foreign cities and witness the discussions at the British military camp the most important statement of collective German guilt and responsibility is generated in a dialogue between Anna and Robert during a party to celebrate her engagement to Alexander:

Anna: “Was ist das eigentlich für ein Gefühl Bomben auf Frauen und Kinder zu werfen?”

Robert: “Frag eure Luftwaffe. Schon vergessen, wer den Krieg begonnen hat?”

Anna: “Ihr seid kaum besser als die Nazis.”

Robert: “Meinst du die hier, die du hier eingeladen hast?”

Anna: “Das war nicht ich.”

Robert: “Den Satz solltest du dir merken für die Zeit danach.”

Robert points out that not only the abstract entity of “die Nazis” is responsible for the war but also those who were not directly involved, i.e., the followers and bystanders. While this conversation is the historically most adequate account, it is the only reference to collective German responsibility.

Although another scene indicates Nazi crimes, particularly the Holocaust, it dubiously merges Jewish and German victimhood. Anna's best friend Maria is married to Simon Goldberg, whose marriage is the only reason that he has not been deported yet. Nevertheless, he lives in constant fear of being deported and his only wish is that the Red Army arrives in Dresden and prevents the killing of the few remaining Jews. Information about the concentration camps and the mass killings is kept vague and core details – that Jews were rounded up and taken to the camps where they were either instantly killed in the gas chambers or had to work under inhuman circumstances – and the extent and brutality of the crime are never mentioned. Furthermore, Simon Goldberg is a questionable choice for representing fate of all Jews in the Third Reich since his story depicts the exception of survival to the rule of mass murder. As Crew (2007) put it, “*Dresden* avoids disquieting questions about the great majority who were murdered” (125). Moreover, while the subplot about Simon Goldberg draws attention to the fate of the Jews during the Third Reich, it suggests that his wife Maria suffers as much as her husband and that she rather than he is the hero as she suffers altruistically to protect him. Although she does not have to fear being deported herself, her life is much harder than that of other Germans since the Goldbergs receive fewer foot stamps, German society segregates her because of her Jewish husband, and since Simon is not allowed to use a bombing shelter and Maria stays with him out of solidarity, both of them are in danger of being killed during the raids. While Simon's life during the last period of the war is in itself an exception because most Jews had been killed at this point, Maria's altruistic and voluntary suffering makes her the ultimate victim and hero. As such, not only is Jewish suffering linked with German suffering in the only reference to the Holocaust but the dedication, solidarity, and love that Maria displays for her husband as well as

Anna's courageous support for the couple focuses on the 'good Germans' rather than on the Jewish victims.

There are three other scenes in which Germans are cast as the primary victims of Nazi crimes. When Anna rides the tram, she sees a forced laborer, who has been hanged on a lamppost, and is wearing a sign that says: "Ich habe mit einer deutschen Frau Rassenschande getrieben." Next to him, stands the German woman who is accused of having the affair with him. Her hair has been shorn and she stands in the freezing cold only dressed in a shirt and is publicly humiliated. The murder of the forced laborer is thus merged with the suffering of the German women. In a later scene, a woman is accused of hiding her husband, who deserted from the *Wehrmacht*. Anna tries to save the women from being shot, which prompts the two soldiers to put both women against the wall to be shot. While Anne is rescued at the last minute by Alexander, the deserter's wife is killed by the soldiers. In another incident, which happens shortly after the city has been bombed, two soldiers arrest a German man holding a baby in his arms who retrieved a pan out of the rubble of a house. The soldiers take the baby and shoot the man on the spot because of looting. These incidents show that *Dresden* links the depiction of Nazi terror predominantly with the suffering of German civilians.

It is furthermore striking that although the film shows a clichéd representation of a *Gauleiter* and some stereotypical goose-stepping *Wehrmacht* soldiers, there are no 'real' Nazis among the main characters. The film's main protagonist, Anna Mauth, represents the image of 'the good German.' She was not only a child and adolescent during most of the Third Reich and is thus exculpated as too young to bear responsibility for the crimes but the filmmakers also chose a female character as their main protagonist, a tendency shared with other *TV-Event Movies* like *Die Flucht* or *Vom Glück nur ein Schatten*. Because of the clichéd opposition

between genders, women are generally understood as victims rather than perpetrators and ascribed attributes of innocence and helplessness. Anna is not an enthusiastic follower of the Nazi ideology. She is not interested in politics but is dedicated to her inherently altruistic and nurturing work as a nurse. She is described as a person with a good heart who has high moral and humanitarian values, and a strong sense of justice. When Anna finds Robert in the hospital's basement, she knows that helping the wounded British pilot is treason. She asks a priest for advice: "Was soll man tun, wenn jemand einen um Hilfe bittet." The priest, who later helps Anna and Robert figure out a flight plan, is, like Anna, a 'good German.' He answers with a quote from the Bible which says that we are only expected to help when it is within our power. The priest's response suggests that in the Third Reich it is sometimes impossible to help. However, Anna is not satisfied with his answer and responds: "Aber wie soll man damit weiter leben, wenn man nicht hilft?" Anna is described as a person who has deeply rooted altruistic values and who is always ready to help others, regardless what consequences that has for her, as evidenced in saving Robert's life, her support of the deserter's wife, and helping her friend Maria by providing her and Simon with food. Cooke sees in Anna "Germany's enlightened, democratic future" (*Dresden* 291) and Ebbrecht describes her as "untainted by Nazism" (*History, Public Memory* 228) and even argues that Anna could be seen as "an antagonist against the Nazi regime" (*History, Public Memory* 228) because of her relationship to the British pilot. However, her opposition is not politically motivated but rather based on supposedly ahistorical ideals of altruism. Anna is cast as naïve, innocent and good at heart and simply too good to be believable. As the above-cited dialogue indicates, at first, she is appalled that Robert is a bomber pilot and accuses him of not being any better than the Nazis. Later, however, she understands that Germans are largely responsible for their own suffering. When Dresden is being bombed,

her former fiance Alexander points at the burning sky and tells Anna “das ist er,” meaning Robert and his fellow pilots who are bombing the city, but Anna responds “nein, das sind wir.”

Anna is thus a sympathetic character who is largely exculpated from any responsibility by her age and gender yet takes it on voluntarily by claiming “das sind wir,” who are responsible for Dresden’s destruction. She functions as the idealized embodiment of the ordinary Germany and thus incites audiences to believe that they would have acted like her. The fact that Anna is portrayed by actress Felicitas Woll, who is well-known for starring in the ARD TV series *Berlin, Berlin*, where she represents a “symbol of a new modern German youth” (Ebbrecht, “History, Public Memory” 229), according to Ebbrecht this connotation is transferred to *Dresden* which makes Anna Mauth a “representative of a new, innocent, forward-looking generation in Germany” (“History, Public Memory” 229). Not only is the main character not cast as a convinced Nazi but the other characters in *Dresden* are also neither true Nazis nor really bad characters. Anna’s mother is portrayed as not interested in politics and as a shallow woman who is most concerned about her social status. Anna’s sister Eva is depicted as a typical follower, who is, however, mitigated by her young age. While she is a BDM leader and has an affair with the *Gauleiter*’s assistant, she is depicted as a typical teenager who is most interested in entertainment and flirting. There is one incident when she threatens to denounce a waitress for gossiping about the approaching Red Army, but later she admits that she would never have done that and that she just wanted her to shut her up so that she could be left in peace and enjoy her cake.

Anna’s father comes closest to the ‘bad guy’ of the melodrama but he is not a convinced Nazi. With the help of the *Gauleiter*’s assistant, he hides morphine which was intended for the hospital and sells it on the black market. As there is no morphine left for the hospital, soldiers

have to suffer extreme pain as the staff has to operate without anesthesia. Carl Mauth knows that to continue his illegal business, he needs the support of some local Nazis. However, as his ironic remarks indicate, he is not a convinced Nazis himself. Furthermore, he has known for a long time that Germany will lose the war. He sells the morphine in order to start a new life in Switzerland. Although he locks Anna in her room and intends to report Robert to the Gestapo, he seems primarily motivated by wanting to protect Anna and while he is unethical and selfish, he is not a convinced Nazi. Nevertheless, the melodramatic convention demands that the villain is punished in the end and thus when he tries to escape the firestorm, Carl Mauth is hit by a wall and before he dies in agony apologizes to Anna and tells her: “Gehe Deinen Weg.” Crew (2007) argues that “a German who deprives good German soldiers of the morphine they so desperately need deserves a horrible death” (122). While Cooke interprets this scene as liberating Anna “from the legacy of her parents’ generation” (“*Dresden*” 291) and one may even argue that as he repents his sins, Anna’s father is dubiously absolved of his guilt in the end.

Although Anna’s fiancé Alexander becomes her father’s accomplice in selling the morphine, he is appalled by the shady business. Alexander comes from a poor background and had to work very hard to become a doctor and feels indebted to Carl Mauth since he not only supported him in his career and saved him from being sent to the front but was even willing to let Alexander marry his daughter. Alexander embodies the subject positions of the follower. Although he becomes guilty of helping Anna’s father in the illegal sale of the morphine, he does everything he can to save the wounded soldiers in the hospital, later rejects Carl Mauth’s path and even helps Anna and Robert to reunite. Together, they survive the bombing of the city, during which he assists a woman to give birth. After the firestorm, he does not flee the destroyed



city like everybody else who survived but stays and helps those who are wounded and trapped in the ruins. Cooke (“*Dresden*”) argues that Alexander is redeemed in the end by helping others.

Not only is there no ‘true’ Nazi among the main characters but even among the minor characters there are hardly any Nazis. The only ‘real’ Nazi is the cliché representation of Saxony’s *Gauleiter* who praises the miracle weapons with which the Germans will still win the war. While he is imbued with an aura of danger and power, he is also depicted as a ridiculous figure. When Anna’s mother asks how the *Führer* is doing, the *Gauleiter* brags that he just talked to him on the phone and then starts talking about the *Endsieg*, in which only he still seems to believe. And when he asks the priest, the same in whom Anna had confided and who helps Anna and Robert to plan their escape, for a biblical confirmation of the final victory, the priest responds: “Übe an ihnen Vergeltung, Herr, nach dem Werk ihrer Hände. Und es regnete Feuer und Schwefel vom Himmel und brachte alle um.” Not realizing the irony, the *Gauleiter* agrees dim-wittedly. Later, when he encounters Robert, who is wearing a German uniform, he thinks the British pilot is a wounded German soldier who is mute. The *Gauleiter* is the only ‘real’ Nazi and his role is only a very small one. Aside from him, there are some menacing soldiers who shoot the man who was supposedly looting and others who kill the deserter’s wife. All other characters, are either opponents (the priest, Maria and to some extent Anna), bystanders (Alexander, Anna’s mother), or followers (Eva, Carl Mauth). However, Anna’s father does not believe in Nazism but adjusts to the situation because it guarantees success, social status, and material gain. In the end, he even sabotages the war, which makes him guilty of high treason, when he sells the morphine on the black market.

The absence of any ‘real’ Nazis is indicative of the depiction of Germans in the film. *Dresden* ignores that the vast majority of Germans supported Nazism actively and passively and

had been enthusiastic about the war. The movie furthermore omits that most Germans had either approved of or looked the other way during the deportations of the Jews and that many had looted the goods of their Jewish neighbors. Denunciations of hidden Jews and of those who had helped them, was a rule and not an exception. *Dresden*, however, creates a clear dichotomy between a minute number of leading Nazis and ordinary Germans who are solely depicted as opponents, bystanders or followers and subsequently as bombing victims in order to exculpate them from individual and collective guilt and responsibility. The film essentially enacts the conservative myth that an evil Hitler and a handful of henchmen seduced and forced the innocent and decent German people into a dictatorship.

The absence of any ‘real’ Nazis is in line with the focus on depicting Germans as victims of the Second World War and the Third Reich. *Dresden* represents German civilians not only as victims of Allied bombings but also of Nazism. Germans are victimized for being married to Jews, for having relationships with forced laborers and killed for supposed looting and hiding their deserter husbands. In the first part of the mini-series, we furthermore see how large refugee treks arrive in Dresden, who are fleeing the approaching Red Army. Women and children are dressed in rags, are suffering from the cold weather and have nothing to eat and nowhere to go. In the hospital scenes, the audience sees the horrors of war. Severely wounded German soldiers scream in pain and die terrible deaths. Of course, German suffering culminates in the bombing of the city. The inferno itself takes up some thirty-five minutes of screen time and an additional ten minutes depict the aftermath and destruction of the city. When the pilots drop the bombs on the city, a firestorm blasts through the city that burns everything to the ground. We see people cowering in bomb shelters who burn to death, in other cellars they suffocate from the lack of oxygen. We see also a woman begging a soldier to shoot them all before they will slowly die in

agony. With tears in his eyes the young man shoots the praying people and then himself. Outside the air raid cellars people burn alive. Houses are bombed to ruins, and the firestorm reaches temperatures of 1000 degrees, which burns human beings to ashes in seconds. The audience sees a woman with a burning baby carriage and a man whose wooden leg catches fire. The wonders of digital technology allowed the filmmakers to portray the terrible fate of Dresden's citizen as a high end special effects spectacle. Special pyrotechnic effects were used to depict the burning city as realistically as possible. Special digital effects heightened the sound's real time experience. Even though the television-watching experience is not as intense as in a cinema, these special effects provoke a physical response in the audience. Ebbrecht puts it as follows: "These effects have in the first instance an emotional function, overwhelming the audience and involving them in the film's story. In addition, they create the impression of realism and historical authenticity" ("History, Public Memory" 230). As the film appeals to the emotions, it does not "require viewers to do much thinking about the past, especially about its moral ambiguities and contradictions" (Crew 129).

The day after the bombing, shows the great extent of destruction. Dresden was razed to the ground and does not exist anymore. No building is standing; everything lies in ruins. The few surviving Germans are under shock and in despair. Anna and Robert stand next to the *Frauenkirche*, which withstood the bombing but collapsed two days later on February 15, 1945. Robert climbs to the top of the church tower and stands at the same spot where he had stood with Anna only a few days earlier. Following his gaze, the audience saw an archival image of Dresden's beautiful old city then and they now see archival footage of the destroyed city and get a sense of the vast scale of destruction. The audience hears Anna's voice-over, telling us the sentimental end of the love story: Robert went back to England but was to return a few months

later for the birth of their daughter only to crash with his plane over the North Sea and his body was never found. Anna's and Robert's daughter becomes a symbol for a new beginning and a "promise of reconciliation between German victims and British enemies" (Crew 131). In the final scene, the audience sees archival footage of the destroyed *Frauenkirche* after it had collapsed and images of Dresden of October 30, 2005, the date when its reconstruction had been completed. A crowd stands in front of the church. Inside, president Horst Köhler gives a speech which ends with the following words in several languages: "Friede sei mit Euch." Cooke states that the *Frauenkirche* turns into "an international symbol of pacifism" ("*Dresden*" 292). In addition, he notes that *Dresden's* final scene echoes Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) when some of the Jews he had rescued gather at his grave accompanied by the actors who had portrayed them. In *Dresden* we see the city's citizens gather in front of the church to celebrate the dedication of the *Frauenkirche*. According to Cooke, "the *Frauenkirche* acts as the symbolic heart of a nation that is now a beacon of pacifism, not because Germany has accepted its guilt for unleashing the war but because it, along with its Jewish citizens, suffered the consequences, consequences that actually allow the nation to empathize with its former enemies and victims, highlighted in the moment during the service when one hears Köhler literally speak the language of these other groups" ("*Dresden*" 293).

While seeing the images of the reconstructed church, Anna's voice-over states: "Es ist schwer zu begreifen, was damals im Februar 1945 passiert ist. Aber jeder, der überlebt hat, hatte die Verpflichtung etwas Neues zu schaffen. Wer immer nur zurückschaut, sieht immer nur seinen Schatten." Since her words are the last, they function as a final message of the film. However, Anna's request to let bygones be bygones is ethically questionable because it not only asks to leave the bombing of Dresden behind but covertly also includes German crimes.

According to Crew (2007), *Dresden* retreats into the “safety of non-judgment” (131) and “questions of guilt and responsibility are submerged in a ‘natural history of destruction,’ as W. G. Sebald has put it, which presents the war as a disaster for which no ordinary person appears to have been responsible but from which everyone eventually suffered” (131-132).

The new genre of *TV-Event Movies* currently constitutes the most effective medium for shaping historical consciousness because they are widely consumed and merge historically dramatic situations with the clichés of melodrama and thus they play an important role in the contemporary discourse on German victimhood. *Dresden* did not succeed in showing both German suffering and German responsibility for Nazi crimes. Although there are some attempts made to present a balanced view, the film does not represent the context in a historically responsible manner. While the film succeeds in showing the horrors of war in general and states that Nazi Germany initiated firebombing of foreign cities, it does not show the foreign but only the German victims. *Dresden* is void of any ‘true’ Nazis, collective and individual German guilt and responsibility are largely ignored and the extent of the crimes committed in the Third Reich generally and of the Holocaust in particular is minimized. *Dresden* displaces Nazi victims from their discursive position as victims and replaces them with German victims, or at least suggests that the discursive position of ‘victim’ could be shared between both groups. And as the images of Dresden’s firestorm will stay with the audience and overshadow and compete with the pictures of Jewish suffering, *Dresden* incites a distorted view of history that highlights German suffering, which constitutes a gesture towards balancing an account, as if “Dresden Auschwitz abgegolten hätte,” as Theodor Adorno put it already in 1947.

### *The Official Reception in Newspaper Reviews*

The official reception of the film was predominantly positive. Of the twenty-two newspaper reviews I analyzed, thirteen were laudatory, six were critical and three neutral. Rave reviews were published in a variety of newspapers ranging from the populist *Bildzeitung* to more conservative newspapers like *FAZ* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and even to the left wing *taz*. For instance, Christian Buss (2006), describes *Dresden* in the *taz* as “ein komplexes, bewegendes, ungeschöntes Kriegsmelodram.” and in an interview with the *Bildzeitung*, former German chancellor Helmut Kohl states in the *Bild-Zeitung* “*Dresden* ist ein ganz großer Film, einer der besten der deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte” (Vetterick 5).

Laudatory reviews stress that the difficult task of finding the right balance between depicting German suffering and at the same time German guilt and responsibility has been accomplished. Hannah Pilarczyk (2006) describes *Dresden* in her *taz* article as the ‘litmus test’ that established that it is possible to make a historically responsible movie about German suffering: “Mit der Verfilmung der Dresdner Bombennacht vom 13. Februar 1945 hat sich das ZDF ein Projekt ausgesucht, dessen Fallhöhe unermesslich ist [...] Dresden ist die Nagelprobe für das ZDF und die Produktionsfirma teamworx, ob man einen so kontroversen und sensiblen Stoff fiktionalisieren kann, ohne ihn der politischen Instrumentalisierung preis zu geben.” She concludes that “diese Probe ist gelungen” precisely because the film lacks revisionist tendencies since “für Opferdiskurse bieten sich aber keine Ansatzpunkte.” Pilarczyk reflects the general tendency of the reviews which largely agree that there the civilian German victimhood is represented without revisionist overtones. Michael Hanfeld (2006) writes, likewise in the *taz*, that “Buch und Regie haben etliche Sicherungen (vielleicht sogar zu viele) eingebaut, von kleinen Randszenen bis zu dem durchgängigen Motiv des Simon Goldstein, um revanchistische

Gedanken gar nicht erst aufkommen zu lassen. Hier gibt es keine Aufrechnung” (33). And according to Joachim Käppner’s (2006) review in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “hat es der Spielfilm *Dresden* geschafft, deutsche Schuld *und* deutsche Qualen darzustellen [...] Wer sich aber, wie die große Mehrzahl der Deutschen heute, der historischen Schuld stellt, kann auch das deutsche Leid aus jener Zeit angemessen würdigen – das hat *Dresden*, mit den Zuspitzungen eines Spielfilms, geschafft.” Reviewers agree that instead of attempting to balance any scores, the film highlights the notion of reconciliation, Hanfeld (2006), for instance, attributes to *Dresden* a “völkerverständigende Botschaft” and argues that it takes up an antiwar stance (33). Marianne Kolarik (2006) hypothesizes in the *Kölner Stadtanzeiger* that it is precisely the symbiosis of fiction and historical facts that delivers the anti-war message: “Aber erst die Verquickung der emotionalen Ebene mit den historischen Fakten, die von Fachberatern und einer Historikerkommission unter Leitung von Rolf-Dieter Müller recherchiert worden sind, macht den Film zu einem so nachdrücklichen wie gegenwärtigen Film gegen den Krieg” (n.pag.).

Reviewers unanimously argue that *Dresden* generates a historically accurate picture of German society during National Socialism in which reflects the “Verhaltensvielfalt innerhalb der deutschen Bevölkerung” (n.pag.), as Viola Bolduan (2006) puts it in the *Main-Taunus-Kurier*. Hannah Pylarczyk (2006) likewise notes that the film includes “ein Ensemble, das von der herrischen BDM-Schwester bis zum widerständischen Pfarrer fast alles Leben in einer Stadt im sechsten Kriegsjahr abbildet.” Volker Corsten (2006) furthermore argues in *Welt am Sonntag* that *Dresden* is a film, “der packt, der erschüttert, der die ganze Grausamkeit und Härte des Krieges zeigt, aber weder die Briten zu Aggressoren noch die Deutschen zu unschuldigen Opfern eines Krieges macht.” Marianne Kolarik (2006) similarly writes that “ebenso nachvollziehbar wie die existenzielle Verzweiflung der Menschen, die sich in Keller und Bunker geflüchtet haben

und dort zu ersticken drohen, werden die strategischen Überlegungen der Alliierten, die sich im Januar 1945 entschlossen haben, mit einer Luftoffensive den Krieg so schnell wie möglich zu beenden, um weiteres Blutvergießen zu verhindern” (n.pag.). Another core aspect of laudatory reviews is the notion that the film responsibly represents the question of whether the bombing of Dresden was strategically necessary for ending the war. According to an anonymous reviewer (“*Dresden*”) at kino.de,

bei aller gebotenen Vorsicht, jede Form von Revanchismus zu vermeiden, macht Dresden dennoch nie einen Hehl daraus, wie unnötig die Bombardierung Dresdens in der Nacht des 13. Februar 1945 war. Selbst unter den britischen Befehlshabern gab es Stimmen, die davon abrieten, die wegen ihrer architektonischen Schönheit weltweit gepriesene, militärisch aber völlig unbedeutende Stadt dem Erdboden gleichzumachen; doch Winston Churchill bestand darauf, gegenüber den Sowjets ein Zeichen der Stärke zu setzen.

In an interview with *Die Welt*, historian Hans Mommsen (Kellerhof “Der Historiker”), who had served as an adviser for *Dresden*, similarly argued that Arthur Harris’ decision to bomb Dresden is still very controversial today:

Bekanntlich ist die grundsätzliche Bewertung der von Arthur Harris durchgesetzten Luftoffensive, soweit sie bewußt die Zivilbevölkerung traf, bis heute strittig [...]. Es mehren sich die Stimmen, die zwar die psychologischen Motive der britischen Luftwaffenführung und Churchills angesichts der Rücksichtslosigkeit der deutschen Führung und der Bedrohung mit neuen Waffen berücksichtigen, aber doch die



Zuspitzung der auf Bevölkerungsverluste gerichteten Flächenbombardements für strategisch und moralisch fragwürdig halten. Nicht im Sinne einer rückwärtsgerichteten Aufrechnung, aber einer Mahnung, Konsequenzen aus den Erfahrungen von 1944/45 zu ziehen und Exzesse der Luftkriegsführung künftig zu unterbinden.

Mommsen furthermore argues that

*Dresden* vermeidet jeden Ansatz einer Aufrechnung, stellt vielmehr den Gedanken der Ablehnung des Krieges als Mittel der Politik in den Vordergrund. Mit der stark komprimierten Wiedergabe der Meinungsverschiedenheiten im britischen Bomber Command über die Zweckmäßigkeit des Flächenbombardements und der Zerstörung Dresdens spricht der Film den Aspekt der Rechtmäßigkeit des Vorgehens nur indirekt an. Die gleichzeitige Schilderung der Durchhaltepropaganda des NS-Regimes, aber auch des Terrors, den die Gestapo ausübt, schafft ein Gleichgewicht (n.pag.).

The laudatory reviews thus largely focus on the content of the film rather than its aesthetics and praise the supposedly well-balanced and historically accurate representation of the diverse subject positions of Germans as perpetrators, followers, bystanders and victims. Negative reviews, which are in the minority as only six of the twenty-two review articles are critical, on the other hand particularly criticize the kitsch-sentimental aesthetics of the film. Roger Boyes (2006) calls the film “Versöhnungskitsch” (n.pag.) in *Die Welt*, Evelyn Finger describes it as an “Antikriegsschmonzette” (“Der englische Pilot” 50) in *Die Zeit*, Joachim Güntner (2006) terms it “Bomben-Kitsch” and warns that “vor dem Kitsch gibt es kein Entkommen” in *Neue Zürcher*

*Zeitung*. Peter von Becker (2006) complains in *Der Tagesspiegel* that the ZDF throws “Schmalzbomben auf Dresden” (8) and Kerstin Decker (2006) detects “Krankenhausserien-Dramatik” in *Dresden* and argues in her *taz* article that the film constitutes “eine Verhöhnung des Leids” [...] weil er die emotionale Intelligenz, die Bilder und die Handlung einer Vorabend-Krankenhausserie hat.” She admonishes that Kitsch ist Kitsch, sonst nichts, schon richtig, aber manchmal ist er ein Verbrechen” (27).

However, even among the critical responses only Evelyn Finger notices a “revanchistische Dynamik” (“Der englische Pilot” 50) in *Dresden* and argues that the film does not succeed in portraying German suffering in a historically responsible manner but rather falsifies history despite its overt political correctness and Kerstin Decker (2006) states that particularly the film’s ending shows a tendency to balance the score:

Vor dem Hintergrund des drastisch ausgemalten Feuersturms verblasst die Schuld des deutschen Normalbürgers – eine faschistische Partei gewählt, den Holocaust geduldet und die Nazidiktatur mitgetragen zu haben. Wenn in Dresden die Menschen wie lebende Fackeln durch die Straßen rasen, wenn eine Mutter ihren brennenden Kinderwagen hinter sich herzieht, wenn einem Mann beide Beine weggefetzt werden, dann erscheint alles zuvor begangene Unrecht mit einem Schlag abgebußt [...] Wer vorher Täter war, ist plötzlich Opfer. Wer sich vorher mitschuldig fühlte an Hitlers ‘totalem Krieg,’ ist nun ins Recht gesetzt durch Churchills ‘moral bombing.’ (27)

She furthermore argues that *Dresden* not only exculpates Germans from their guilt but even dubiously depicts them as heroes:

Denn die Deutschen benehmen sich jetzt enorm heldenhaft. Annas Verlobter solidarisiert sich mit seinem Nebenbuhler. Ein weinender Soldat gibt Sterbenden auf Wunsch den Gnadenschuss. Und am Morgen nach dem Brand teilt ein abgezehrter Junge sein letztes Stückchen Brot mit einem einsam auf den Trümmern hockenden Mädchen. So sieht Selbstglorifizierung im großen Fernsehstil aus [...] Ihr Gang durchs Höllenfeuer hat sie moralisch erhöht. (27)

Contrary to Finger's and Decker's perceptive critique, the remaining four negative reviews criticize the film not for either its falsification of history or its kitsch aesthetics but rather for its political correctness. Roger Boyes (2006), for instance, considers *Dresden* "Propaganda der Versöhnung und der political correctness" (n.pag.) and argues that the preoccupation with counteracting a German "Opferkult" conveys the message that the German population deserved to suffer:

Warum hat Deutschland nicht den Mut, seine Geschichte auf seine Weise zu erzählen? Warum muß [sic] man Dresden durch britische *und* deutsche Augen sehen? Offenbar hatten die Filmemacher so viel Angst vor einem unterstellten Opferkult, daß sie den Plot wie eine Gans stopften: korrupte Ärzte, exekutierte Deserteure, verfolgte Juden, finstere Gestapo-Agenten auf der Suche nach Spionen. All das, um der Welt zu zeigen: Seht her! Wir sind keine Rechtsradikalen! Absurder Rückschluß aus dieser Form der Geschichtserzählung wurde, daß die Deutschen verdient haben, Opfer zu sein. (n.pag.)

He furthermore considers Robert rather than Anna to be the main protagonist and (tragic) hero of the film and rejects this notion as historically irresponsible: “Die Filmemacher haben aus einem britischen Bomberpiloten einen romantischen Helden gemacht – die exakte Verkehrung der historischen Wahrheit. Und die ist, immer noch schwer für Engländer zu akzeptieren: Churchill hat einen furchtbaren Krieg gegen die deutschen Städte angeordnet. Es gibt keinen Platz für britisches Heldentum in der Dresden-Geschichte” (n.pag.).

And, explicitly rejecting Evelyn Finger’s critique, Peter von Becker (2006) argues in the *Tagesspiegel*:

Eine Wochenzeitung hat in *Dresden* bereits ‘revanchistische Dynamik’ erkannt. Vor dem Hintergrund des drastisch ausgemalten Feuersturms verblasse die deutsche Schuld. Und immer so weiter. Aber das ist Unsinn. Das ist der Diskurs von vorgestern, als jedes Reden über fremde Schuld im Verdacht stand, das Übermaß, das Unmaß der eigenen relativieren zu wollen. Dass die Idee, so systematisch Krieg gegen gut brennbare alte Innenstädte mit möglichst engen Gassen zu führen, nicht mal von Hitler stammt, ändert nichts. Schon die Rede von ‘Schuld’ führt in die Irre. Es geht nicht mehr um die Zurechnung von Schuld, es geht um geschichtliche Erfahrung. Das wäre die Chance gewesen. Geschichtliche Erfahrung ist unteilbar und war dennoch so lange nicht mitteilbar. Dass wir in diesem Land längst das Bewusstsein voraussetzen dürfen, dass der unvorstellbare Zivilisationsbruch des letzten Jahrhunderts deutsch gewesen ist – und nur deutsch. (8)

Von Becker furthermore argues that

man merkt dem Film jederzeit an, dass hier größte Vorsicht gewaltet hat: Man wollte politisch korrekt sein und bloß nicht suggerieren, dass die vielen zehntausend Bombentoten von Dresden, fast alle Zivilisten, irgendwie gegen die Millionen Opfer des deutschen Naziterrors 'aufgerechnet' werden könnten. Nichts dagegen. Wenn es rein filmisch, rein erzählerisch nur nicht immer so absichtsvoll wäre und damit selbst die Opfer der NS-Herrschaft noch als Alibi der Filmemacher instrumentalisiert würden. (8)

Arnulf Baring (2006), who experienced the bombing of Dresden as a twelve-year-old, similarly argues in *Die Welt*:

Der Film will es allen recht machen. Er ist ein ängstlicher Kompromiß, der den heutigen Stand politischer Korrektheit nie aus den Augen verliert. Niemand soll ihm nachsagen können, er sei in eine falsche Richtung (was ist das eigentlich heute, bei diesem Thema?) abgebogen. Also verhebt und verrenkt er sich am Stoff, scheitert mit seinem rundum bemühten, aber kennnisarmen guten Willen.

Like Boyes, Baring considers Robert the main character of the film and rejects this plot device:

Es war eine ganz absonderliche Idee, einen englischen Piloten, obendrein mit einer deutschen Mutter, zur zentralen Person dieses Films zu machen. Dabei hätte doch der Untergang Dresdens unbedingt am Beispiel, im Schicksal deutscher Bürger, Dresdner Bewohner verdeutlicht werden müssen. Wollte man hier etwa dem menschenfeindlichen,

verbrecherischen Vernichtungswillen der Royal Air Force die Liebe eines Bomberpiloten zu einer jungen Deutschen entgegensetzen. Aber ist das nicht blasphemisch?

He furthermore criticizes that the German men in *Dresden* pale in comparison to the British hero which he explains via the notion of German self-hatred:

Es fällt überhaupt auf, daß die männlichen deutschen Hauptfiguren sämtlich mehr oder weniger problematisch sind. Kein einziger ist so schön und edel wie der Engländer. Glaubt man wirklich, es habe damals keine großartigen, selbstlosen, hilfsbereiten, vorbildlichen Männer unter den Deutschen gegeben? Haben hier deutsches Minderwertigkeitsgefühl, deutscher Selbsthaß, hat der Haß [sic] auf die Väter wieder einmal die Feder geführt?

Joachim Güntner (“Bomben-Kitsch”) likewise criticizes the film’s political correctness because “peinlich besorgt vermeidet er die Vorwürfe des Revanchismus und der Aufrechnung,” he furthermore criticizes that “was Dresden vor seinem Untergang gewesen war, kulturell und sozial, bringt der Film kaum je zu fasslicher Anschauung.”

Although the critical reviews unanimously reject the film’s kitsch aesthetic, only two of them also criticize the depiction of German suffering at the expense of largely effacing collective German support of the Third Reich and the consequent transformation of followers and bystanders into victims. The other four reviewers criticize the film for the contrary notion of its overt political correctness and admonish that *Dresden* over-emphasizes the importance of German guilt which to them trivializes the suffering of the bombing victims. Most striking is that

the film did not generate controversy despite the fact that it was the first television movie to depict German wartime suffering and that its overt political correctness hides covert revanchistic ideas, which seems to indicate that the notion of German civilian victimhood is becoming widely accepted in official memory.

### *The Vernacular Reception in Viewer Responses*

For the analysis of how audiences consume *Dresden* and how this in turn affects German cultural memory I could not rely on letters that viewers had sent to the ZDF since the TV station does not archive any letters. However, they summarize all letters and call-in comments in short reports before they discard the originals and the ZDF provided me with the summary of viewer responses. As the document demonstrates, the TV-station received a significant amount of viewer feedback: four hundred calls and seven hundred letters of which two hundred-fifty commented critically on the film and four hundred-sixty positively. (The summary does not specify how the remaining three hundred-ninety viewers reacted). However, these numbers have to be taken with some reservation since the data was interpreted by ZDF employees who may be biased to read the feedback favorably. As the report could show a biased interpretation of the data and because the summaries of viewer comments do not provide verbatim quotes, I decided to not use the ZDF report for my analysis but rather analyzed the on-line discussion forum at [www.zdf.de](http://www.zdf.de). Like the feedback to the TV channel, the forum exhibited a vast amount of viewer responses in many different threads.

Positive reviews respond enthusiastically particularly to the love story. Schnörkelchen<sup>53</sup> (2006) writes: “Dieser Film hat nicht im Geringsten enttäuscht, sondern emotional sehr bewegt – auf der einen Seite diese total romantische Liebesgeschichte und auf der anderen Seite all das Beklemmende und Schreckliche dieser düsteren Zeit.” Viewers reacting positively praise *Dresden* particularly for activating their emotions. Jule@suhl (2006) thus states:

Der Film hat mich total mitgenommen. Ich habe lange geweint und war völlig aufgelöst. Ich fand ihn sehr, sehr gut. Ich werde ihn in meine Liste der besten Filme einfügen. Es ist so schlimm, was damals passiert ist. Ich habe noch nicht allzuviel vom zweiten Weltkrieg erfahren. Alle, die das miterleben mussten, tun mir sehr, sehr Leid [sic].

Laudatory reviews furthermore note that *Dresden* did succeed in depicting the historical events and in conveying the horrors of the bombings and of war in general. Bonn1972 (2006) explains: “Positiv fand ich aber, dass zum ersten mal in einem Spielfilm technisch gezeigt wurde was die Frauen und Kinder in den Bombennächten durchstehen mussten. Da ich zu der Generation gehöre die dieses nicht mehr erlebt hat, konnte ich einen Feuersturm mir [sic] nur schwer vorstellen.” elli-nida (2006) similarly notes: “Wie man sich im Krieg fühlt fand ich hier nämlich sehr gut gezeigt (u.a. die Hoffnungslosigkeit der Menschen in den Kellern). Und das sollte doch wohl auch ein Ziel des Films sein.” Reviewers look favorably upon the movie’s ability to make people think and talk about the historical events. touengine (2006) points out that *Dresden* encouraged his/her children to learn more about the bombing of Dresden, and

<sup>53</sup> Internet users get user names in order to stay anonymous. These names sometimes ignore spelling and upper/lower case rules and other regulations. In this dissertation, I quote the original usernames as found on the respective Internet forums.



AlfLE (2006) argues that the film represents “ein Thema, was viele bewegt(e) und zu zahlreichen Disputen über den Film anregen wird. [...] eins hat der Film bewirkt: Man denkt darüber nach und zieht für sich eigene Schlüsse und Empfindungen. Das ist doch der eigentliche Zweck des Films, die Menschen zum Nachdenken anzuregen.”

While positive reviewers particularly praised the emotional impact the melodramatic love story had on them, it also received the most vehement criticism by critical viewers who argue that a melodramatic love story is not an appropriate mode for depicting such a serious subject as it trivializes the experience of the bombing victims. Laribum (2006) writes: “Mir geht es nicht darum, dass ein Film über ein solches Ereignis alle Opfer in Großaufnahme zeigt, aber eine kitschige Liebesgeschichte als Weichspüler für die werberelevante Zielgruppe ist glatter Hohn gegenüber den Opfern.” mmp (2006) similarly argues that “eine schmalzige Romanze mit einem ernsten Thema, wie der Bombardierung Dresdens zu vermischen, kommt einer Verhöhnung der Opfer gleich.” And boudicca (2006) writes: “Eigentlich sollte die Stadt und ihre Zerstörung im Mittelpunkt stehen. Aber das ZDF hat es vorgezogen, aus der Katastrophe Dresdens eine – noch dazu unrealistische – Liebesgeschichte zu machen. Schade!”

The most striking feature of the on-line discussion was that unlike the largely laudatory newspaper reviews, the critical responses significantly outnumber positive reviews. Viewers particularly criticized that historic details are not accurate, the simple and lowbrow storyline, the many implausible situations like the numerous chance encounters during the bombing, and the kitschy love story. According to a viewer with the username P-Joker (2006), “bei einem Film mit diesem Titel zu diesem Thema erwartet man etwas Anderes! Hätte man hier mit der Bombardierung begonnen und das Leben danach ausführlicher geschildert wäre man dem eigentlichen Thema sehr viel näher gekommen.” And Orbitator (2006) criticized: “Dresden soll

ja das Fernsehereignis des Jahres sein!“ but instead it is “Der Fernsehschrott des Jahres.” S/he continues: “Ich habe keine Ahnung, ob man beim ZDF allen ernstes [sic] hinter diesem Machwerk steht, oder ob sie sich das zweite Auge auch noch zugehalten haben. Kurz zusammengefasst: Hahnebüchene [sic] Rahmenhandlung; kitschige Dialoge; Jede [sic] Menge Logikfehler und falsche Fakten. [...] Das Drehbuch scheint von einem 12-Jährigen [sic] zu stammen.” *Dresden* caused quite a stir and evoked the need among the audience to express their views. Several discussants note that this is the first time that they have ever registered for an internet forum but that *Dresden* ignited the need to voice their opinion. UnionerBerlin (2006) writes: “Mich hat diese üble Klamotte – im Auftrag eines öfftl.-rechtlichen Senders (!!!) auch erstmalig veranlasst, mich in einem solchen Forum anzumelden! [...] erbärmlicher, peinlicher, schwülstiger, realitätsferner, widerlich-süßlicher, penetranter Hollywood-Abklatsch auf C-Niveau. Es ist eine Schande!” It was particularly striking that critical comments not only far outweighed positive ones but also that they displayed a high level of negative emotions like anger and disappointment in their extensive use of derogatory adjectives. Tofutante (2006) calls the mini-series “grottenschlecht” and Dannnicht (2006) even describes it as “ekelhaft.” Many viewers were also irritated by the vast amount of money spent on the film. According to kfog (2006), “es war zu befürchten, doch einen derartigen Schmarren hätte ich nicht für möglich gehalten. Für wie beschränkt halten die Verantwortlichen im ZDF die Zuschauer eigentlich? Regiefreiheit hin oder her – 10 Millionen Euro Gebührengelder auf eine so skandalöse Art zu versenken, tut schon weh.”

However, a significant number of viewers did not criticize the kitsch aesthetics or the exculpatory transformation of Germans from followers and bystanders into victims but on the contrary considered the portrayal of Germans as far too negative. michel06 (2006) thus observes:

“Und natürlich wie immer. Böse Nazis hinter jeder Staßenecke.” physico (2006) comments on the scene in which a man is shot by German soldiers for looting. “Warum wird der Mann erschossen? Was für eine Frage, so sind die Deutschen, sie töten einfach, es muß wohl an ihren Genen liegen.”Tolstoi (2006) writes about the same scene:

Die Macher wollten einfach dem Eindruck entgegenwirken, die Deutschen würden durch diesen Film zu sehr in der Opferrolle und die Engländer zu sehr als Täter rüber kommen. Meines Erachtens hat man dabei sogar überzogen [...] Ich bin ja schon froh, dass man in Deutschland überhaupt mal damit anfängt auch Filme zu drehen, die Deutsche im Zweiten Weltkrieg als Opfer darstellen. Und wenn dabei Deutsche wie in dieser ‘Topfszene’ dargestellt werden, so zeigt das nur, dass wir in diesem Emanzipationsprozeß noch nicht sehr weit gekommen sind.

Schokakola (2006) particularly rejects that contemporary Germans are constantly ascribed collective guilt and advocates a revanchist normalization of collective German memory in which the crimes against German civilians balance the score:

Wie lange will man uns Deutschen durch solche Filme eigentlich noch einreden, was deutsche Menschen für furchtbare Verbrecher sind? [...] Verbrechen sind auf beiden Seiten geschehen, kein Volk ist besser oder schlechter als das andere, aber gerade uns Deutschen soll, so scheint es, immer wieder ein Schuldbewußtsein eingepfht werden [...] Ich hatte gehofft, daß [sic] *Dresden* aus der Sicht der Opfer gedreht wird, aber das war wieder mal ein Trugschluß [sic] [...] Es stellt sich mir in Anbetracht dieses Films

wirklich die Frage, wie lange man uns Deutschen soetwas [sic] noch vorsetzen kann, ohne, daß sich im Volk endlich einmal Widerstand regt!? – Deutschlands bedeutende Geschichte umfasst mehr als 12 Jahre Nationalsozialismus und den [sic] damit verbundenen Folgen. Schon allein aus diesem Grunde sollte sich kein Deutscher, schon gar nicht Angehörige der Nachkriegsgeneration, durch Machwerke wie jetzt wieder *Dresden* ein falsches Schuldbewußtsein einreden lassen.

Poral (2006) follows Schokakola's stance and attempts to exculpate Germans by emphasizing the achievements of German culture and by questioning the singularity of the Holocaust. In doing so, s/he inadvertently echoes the position of the Historians' Debate of the mid 1980s:

Deutsche Menschen haben der Menschheit einfach zuviel gegeben, an kulturellen Werten auf allen Gebieten, als daß man es auf vermeintliche oder tatsächlich geschehene Verbrechen reduzieren kann. Verbrechen, die im übrigen nicht singulär sind, sondern durchaus und leider, auch von anderen Nationen an den jeweiligen Opfern begangen wurden. Wer bei Wikipedia 'Völkermord' eingibt, der wird eine lange Liste von scheußlichen Verbrechen ermitteln können, die lange vor und auch nach dem Dritten Reich und ohne ein einziges Zutun von Deutschen an anderen Völkern begangen wurden [...] Dies ist zwar tragisch, zeigt aber auch eindrucksvoll, daß der 'singuläre Völkermord' eben so singulär nicht ist!

A similar revisionist tendency can be detected in threads discussing the bombing of Dresden. Several users refer to the bombing as “Massenmord” (merlin1701 2006) or “Völkermord” (Schamil 2006). User moertx (2006), for instance, claims that his/her grandmother was killed by low-level strafing and is angry that these attacks are dismissed as historically inaccurate<sup>54</sup>: “Was die Tiefflieger an den Elbwiesen bzw. über dem Großen Garten anbelangt. Hier kotzt mich es absolut an, dass irgendwelche wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen behaupten, es hätte sie nicht gegeben.” Yvee4 (2006) likewise asks: “Wieso werden die Tiefflieger am nächsten morgen weggelassen?” And BorussenGustav (2006) argues “dass man solche Sachen wie Tieffliegerangriffe nicht verläugnen darf und einen Feuersturm nicht runterspielen soll.” moertx (2006) calls the bombing “Massenmord” and wants to bring those to justice who are responsible for it: “Ich bin froh, dass es diesen Film gibt, denn so wird es nicht vergessen, was unsere Großeltern damals erleben mussten. Leider wurde es bis heute versäumt, auch hier die Verantwortlichen zur Rechenschaft zu ziehen. Denn MORD VERJÄHRT NIE!!!” Konsul68 (2006) similarly identifies the British as the perpetrators and argues that they should be punished for bombing German cities: “Dresden ist und bleibt ein (ungesühntes) Kriegsverbrechen. Bisher wurden ausschließlich Deutsche für die ihrigen Kriegsverbrechen bestraft. Den englischen Kriegsverbrechern wurden stattdessen Denkmäler aufgestellt.”

While a significant number of users in the on-line discussion forum advance revanchist views, there are also users who oppose comments that trivialize Nazi crimes. Laribum (2006), for instance, responds to Schokakola directly:

<sup>54</sup> Eyewitnesses – who had experienced the bombing of Dresden firsthand – have claimed that the attacking planes deliberately machine-gunned people who had fled onto the areas along the Elbe river banks. However, historians agree that in fact the infamous low level attacks had never taken place and dismiss them as legends (Bergander 1998, Schnatz 2000, Taylor 2004).

Und obwohl gerade bei mir eine spezielle Beziehung zum Angriff auf Dresden existiert, weil es nun mal meine Heimatstadt ist, so möchte ich den Beitrag von Schokakola auf das schärfste verurteilen. Diese Revanchismus- Gedanken sind das letzte, was den Opfern (auf beiden Seiten) gerecht wird [...] Aber dennoch ging der Krieg vom Deutschen Reich aus. Und genau wie in Dresden die Zivilbevölkerung das Opfer war, so war sie es in Coventry, London und Warschau usw auch. Wenn man auch um diese Toten trauert und anerkennt, dass Deutsche den Krieg begonnen haben, hat das nichts mit ‘falschem Schuldbewußtsein’ zu tun, sondern mit Verantwortung sowohl gegenüber der Vergangenheit als auch der Zukunft.

viofemme (2006) takes up a similar position and criticizes the new trend of emphasizing Germans as victims in the media representations of the Third Reich:

Natürlich waren auch Deutsche unter den Opfern des Krieges und nicht alle Deutschen waren Täter. Man kann allerdings seit einigen Jahren einen erschreckenden Trend in Bezug auf die mediale Verwertung des Nationalsozialismus und des II. Weltkriegs beobachten. Der Focus verschiebt sich immer mehr zu einer Betrachtungsweise, die die Deutschen in ihrer Opferrolle zeigt. Angefangen mit Berichten über die Flucht bis hin zur Bombardierung deutscher Städte. Der traurige Höhepunkt war der Vergleich Dresden-Holocaust der NPD im sächsischen Landtag [...] Ich bin Deutsche und wünsche mir, dass wir ewig dieses ‘Schuldbewusstsein’ wach halten; als Mahnung und auch aus Verantwortung.

The many discussion threads, including “Historisch bedenkliche Untertöne,” “Dresden,” and “Dresden ... so war es nicht, es war schlimmer ... aus eigener Erfahrung,” indicate that *Dresden* ignited significant debates among viewers, including discussions about the historical accuracy of low level strafing, the exact number of bombing victims, or whether Dresden really was a military important target. Several users even claim that it was not Nazi Germany but Poland who started the war, which generated vast numbers of contrary postings. Furthermore, viewers discuss whether Germans should be considered as victims and even if the bombing of Dresden could be regarded as a form of genocide. While ignited by the TV mini-series, many of the discussions significantly expand beyond the plot. Most threads reflect some revanchist stances – as thread titles like “Dresden ein Kriegsverbrechen,” “Tiefflieger, unsachliche Kritik und einiges mehr,” or “Der Sieger und seine Helfershelfer schreiben Geschichte” indicate – and a significant number of comments represent a distorted and falsified version of history. Neither the reception of *Eine Frau in Berlin* nor of *Der Vorleser* has even remotely reflected such revanchist tendencies. Although I will not discuss the debates in detail as they do not discuss *Dresden*, it is important to highlight that the movie generated many controversies which in turn indicates that there is a strong need to discuss the subject of German victimhood and that collective German memory of this aspect of the past is highly diverse.

### *The Film in the Classroom*

Since besides the media of popular culture the classroom is an important site for students to learn about World War II and the Third Reich teaching materials constitute an influential tool for shaping the collective memory of young Germans and I will therefore again conclude the chapter with their analysis. The only didactic material currently available is *Dresden – Der Film: Filmheft zur Pädagogischen Vor- und Nachbearbeitung*, which is available online at

[www.mkfs.de/fileadmin/PDF/Veranstaltungen/Filmtalk/Filmheft\\_Dresden-1.pdf](http://www.mkfs.de/fileadmin/PDF/Veranstaltungen/Filmtalk/Filmheft_Dresden-1.pdf). Following a short plot summary and information about the filmmakers, producer Nico Hofmann and writer Stefan Kolditz discuss their work and emphasize that *Dresden* is an anti-war film. As Hofmann writes, “Unser Film ist ein Film geworden gegen den Krieg, für eine größere Mitmenschlichkeit – verbunden mit dem tiefen Wunsch nach Frieden” (5). This is followed by an interview with actress Felicitas Woll, who portrays Anna and a very brief section “Dresden historisch,” which provides historical information about the bombing and its aftermath. The *Filmheft* reinforces the core ideas of the film, i.e., that Germans were largely innocent victims and only a small minority were perpetrators, and it creates a historical continuum in which all prior guilt and crime are obliterated by the firebombing. Instead of including information on the history of World War II and the role of ordinary Germans in the Third Reich, Hofmann and Kolditz highlight that they created *Dresden* as an essentially ahistorical antiwar film by primarily depicting the horror of the actual bombing night and only little of the historical context. In her interview, Felicitas Woll likewise highlights the subject position of Germans as victims by explaining that she has a close personal connection to the events in Dresden because her grandmother and great-aunt experienced the bombing. She states that shooting the film made her understand what horror her family and other Germans like them had to go through.

The next chapter, entitled “Zeitzeugenbericht,” provides a short narrative by German eye-witnesses, who had experienced the bombing firsthand. However, the account focusses almost exclusively on the supposed *Tiefflieger* attacks. According to the witness Egon Kunze, those who had survived the bombing night and had fled to the river banks of the Elbe were cruelly attacked by machine gun fire from low flying planes and hunted like animals by British pilots. The witness refers to these attacks as “Menschenjagd” and describes how the planes not only shot at



women and children but also at Red Cross tents. The decision to include this historically false testimony in the *Filmheft* despite the fact that the movie itself had not depicted *Tiefflieger* attacks and that they have been discounted by historians (e.g., Bergander 1998, Schnatz 2000, Taylor 2004) as false, is highly questionable, especially as there is no indication in the that the attacks constitute a distorted collective memory and are not historically verified. Not addressing that historians assess these low-level strafing memories as inaccurate but instead including a supposed eye-witness account of them constitutes a disturbing falsification of history.

The longest essay, entitled “Neues über den Luftangriff auf Dresden 1945,” summarizes the eye-witness testimony of bomber pilot and medical officer Dr. Harry O’Flanagan. The article not only argues that Dresden was not a military significant target but also points out that the British Bomber Command knew that the city was packed with civilians, not only with occupants of the city but also with refugees who had fled the approaching eastern front and that as such it constituted a war crime against civilians. This article describes the bombing of Dresden not as a decision that was made on the justifiable reason to destroy important military institutions but to deliberately kill civilians, mostly women and children and that O’Flanagan had reported that the bomber pilots were sent on their mission with the words “dass sie in die Air Force eingetreten seien, um Deutsche zu töten und genau das würden sie heute Nacht tun” (14). Although the account and analysis are historically accurate, they lack contextualization in that Nazi Germany had initiated the bombing of cities like Rotterdam, London and Coventry.

The actual teaching suggestions only take up a small part of the *Filmheft*, namely three of its twenty-two pages are dedicated to exercises for the classroom. The poorly didacticized exercises do not provide any instructions or guidelines for teachers but only offer sample discussion questions, which are divided into five sections. The first section, “Der Film selbst,”

asks students to discuss the plot and the main characters (e.g. “Erzähle den Film nach. Beschreibe, was den Film noch ausmacht neben der filmischen Erzählung! [...] Beschreibe die einzelnen Charaktere und ihre Handlungsmotivation!”) and encourages them to think about the film’s ‘message’ (e.g. “Welche Stimmung vermittelt der Film? Hat er eine ‘Botschaft’ und wenn ja, wie vermittelt er sie?”). In other words, the section does not encourage critical reflection but simply a reiteration of the dominant mode of interpretation encoded into the film.

The second section, “Realität und Fiktion” is supposedly designed to emphasize the difference between fact and fiction. While it is very important to explain to students that while the bombing of Dresden constitutes a historical event, *Dresden* is a feature film with a fictional plot. However, this section fails in doing so. Students have to answer questions like “Wirkt der Film glaubhaft? Warum/ Warum nicht?” and “Sind die Reaktionen der Figuren nachvollziehbar?” Instead of asking students to identify and critically evaluate the technically innovative if ethically questionable use of documentary footage in a feature film, students only have to identify movie scenes which come across as implausible and this is misleadingly conflated with fictionality in questions like “Welche Szenen wirken realistisch und warum? Gibt es Szenen die unrealistisch/ zu fiktional sind? Welche? Warum?”

The third section, entitled “Tendenz oder Haltung des Films,” poses questions like “Ergreift der Film Partei und wenn ja, für wen? Woran erkennt man eine Parteinahme oder würde sie erkennen? and “Welche Emotionen weckt der Film bei Betrachter? Wie/ mit welchen Mitteln erreicht er das?” As in both previous sections, students are thus again not encouraged to think critically about the questionable transformation of bystanders and followers into perpetrators or its kitsch aesthetics but rather to reiterate the dominant interpretation encoded into the film.

The fourth section, “Zur Historie,” focuses on the historical facts of the bombing and poses the following questions: “Was wissen wir von der Bombardierung Dresdens? Warum wurde Dresden ausgewählt als Angriffsziel? Was waren die strategischen Ziele des Angriffs? Wer waren die Beteiligten des Bombenangriffs? Warum waren die Auswirkungen des Angriffs so verheerend? Hatte der Angriff Auswirkungen auf das Kriegsende?” The questions require only short answers, all of which answers can be found in the short preceding chapter “Dresden historisch” and are thus rather mechanical. They also do not include a comparison of the historical record and the interpretation generated in the feature film. It is particularly striking that the questions only focus on the bombing itself and the historical context that preceded this event is omitted. The *Filmheft* basically takes the events of the attack on Dresden out of the historical continuum and treats the bombing as an isolated and thus ahistorical event. In other words, the bombing of Dresden de-contextualizes and de-historicizes the bombing which results in historical misrepresentation.

The last section, entitled “Zur Vermittlung von Geschichte mittels Film,” poses questions like these: “Gelingt es Autor und Regisseur über die spannende Handlung hinaus Geschichte zu vermitteln bzw. historisches Interesse zu wecken, das über das bloße Anschauen des Films hinausreicht? Regt der Film dazu an, sich ein reflektiertes und differenziertes Urteil zu bilden? [...] Welche Botschaft kann, soll und will ein Antikriegsfilm wie *Dresden* vermitteln?” and “Welche Vor- und welche Nachteile haben die Alternativen historischer Spielfilme oder Dokumentarfilme bei der Vermittlung von Geschichte mittels Film? Was ist ein Historienfilm? Wodurch wird er definiert?” [...] Was macht einen guten Historienfilm aus und wann ist ein solcher negativ zu bewerten?” While it is significant to convey to students that feature films are fictional even if they depict historical events, that both documentary and historical feature films

always convey particular interpretations of these events only some of the questions incite such reflections. Others even covertly provide the ‘correct’ answer, for instance, terming *Dresden* an *Antikriegsfilm* already conveys that its message is to portray the horrors of war. Furthermore, the *Filmheft* does not provide the relevant information or even bibliographical references that would enable students to discuss these questions. There is no information given about the differences between the filmic genres of the documentary and historical feature film nor where students and teachers could find this and/or historiographic information in order to “sich ein reflektiertes und differenziertes Urteil zu bilden” (17).

Only in the last pages does the *Filmheft* briefly introduce the Kurt Vonnegut’s famous novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, which has been translated into German as *Schlachthof 5 oder der Kinderkreuzzug* and narrates the bombing of Dresden from the perspective of an American prisoner of war. The booklet closes with a reference to the accompanying book to the film *Dresden* and the DVD.

Overall, the discussion questions do not incite students to critically evaluate the film but rather to reiterate the dominant reception intended by the filmmakers. The questions are largely superficial and there are also no suggestions or guidelines for the teacher on how to incorporate either the preceding material or the questions into the classroom. Neither the question section nor the preceding information contextualize the bombing of Dresden in the history of the Second World War and National Socialism. That Nazi Germany started the war, that the German population had supported the *totalen Krieg*, that Germans had committed war crimes and initiated a genocide against the Jews and other races they deemed ‘inferior’ is not mentioned at all. Significantly, the *Filmheft* completely ignores the Holocaust, despite the fact that it has been incorporated into the film, if in a strained politically correct way, via the character of Simon

Goldberg. Instead, the historically inaccurate eye-witness account of the supposed *Tiefflieger* attacks, which had been excluded from the film, was given room in the *Filmheft* so that ordinary Germans could be established as victims who were attacked by the British military without any justification. All events that preceded the bombing and the suffering that Germans had brought on others is effaced. In a move that significantly exceeds the film itself in its revisionism, Germans are not present as perpetrators or even as bystanders and followers but solely presented as the victims of a terrible war for which they were not responsible in the *Filmheft*. It cannot be presumed that students know the context of World War II and the Holocaust and it is thus important to contextualize the discussion about the film precisely because *Dresden* focuses predominantly on the suffering of German civilians and the vivid depiction of the firestorm via special effects targets the emotions and the audience cannot help but empathize with the German victims. While the bombing of German cities during World War II and the suffering these events caused for civilians is an important topic in German history that should not be ignored, it needs to be contextualized in the historical circumstances. Looking at the bombing as an isolated, ahistorical incident irresponsibly casts Germans predominantly as innocent victims and the British bomber command as perpetrators. The material provided by the *Filmheft* clearly goes in a revanchist direction and hence misrepresents the history of World War II.

#### *Transforming German National Identity from Bystanders into Victims*

The official reception of the TV mini-series in newspaper articles was predominantly favorable and it was striking that *Dresden* did not give rise to a public controversy. Until recently, attempts to address German wartime suffering have generally provoked heated debates and great controversy, for instance in the public debate over creating a commemorative *Vertriebenenzentrum* in Berlin, and it was argued that the stressing of

German victimhood exculpates them from their previous subject positions in National Socialism. With the exception of two reviewers, neither the critical nor the laudatory reviews perceived the revanchist impulse in the film. On the contrary, the *TV-Event Movie* was even criticized for trivializing the suffering of the German bombing victims by the melodramatic plot. However, in the extensive vernacular reception the critical voices dominated. Among the critical reviewers, however, those that critique the film for its revanchistic overtones of exculpating German collectively are in the minority, and the majority argue that Germans have been portrayed too negatively for fear of violating political correctness. *Dresden* thus evoked significantly more overtly revanchist comments than the reception of the book and film versions of either *Eine Frau in Berlin* or *Der Vorleser*. The treatment of German wartime suffering in *Dresden* and its accompanying *Filmheft*, which was created as part of the promotional materials for the *TV Event Movie*, is highly questionable. The minimally didacticized teaching materials do not exhibit an adequate and nuanced view of the bombing of German cities because it largely de-contextualizes it from the Second World War and casts it as an ahistorical event and only requires students to reiterate the dominant mode of interpretation encoded into the film rather than to think critically about the complex question of German victimhood.

*Dresden* portrays Germans predominantly as victims and obscures the historical context of the bombing of German cities, namely the Second World war and the atrocities committed not only by the *Einsatzgruppen* but also by the *Wehrmacht*, not to mention the industrial-scale mass-killings in concentration and extermination camps, and the fire bombings conducted by the *Luftwaffe* on cities like London, Coventry and Rotterdam. *Dresden* also suppresses the prior subject position of the bombing victims as bystanders, followers, supporters and even perpetrators of Nazi ideology and criminal practice. Such a distorted representation of history is

particularly problematic in *Dresden* because it is intersected by documentary footage and therefore gives the impression of strictly and objectively adhering to the historical facts and because television is the most widely consumed medium and thus has a significant influence on shaping collective memory.

## Conclusion

My dissertation explored the collective memory of Germans as victims of the Third Reich and World War II and analyzed select cultural artifacts as forms of representation and spheres of negotiation over German wartime suffering. This analysis included both the study of the literary texts and films themselves and their reception. After all, textual features only indicate a potential for the (re)construction of collective memory, however, this potential needs to be actualized in the reception process (Kansteiner 2006). I thus examined cultural artifacts primarily as constituents and embodiments of collective memory rather than as aesthetic entities. Since popular cultural media reach the widest audience (Kansteiner 2006), I based my analysis on popular literature, television and commercial cinema and discussed how these post-unification cultural artifacts contribute to the memory discourse on German as victims of World War II. The dissertation focused on how these artifacts construct victims and perpetrators and how they contribute to the *Opferdebatte*.

The selected examples of literary, televisual, and cinematic representations depict three different situations in which Germans were transformed into victims of World War II. *Eine Frau in Berlin* focuses on women who had been raped by Russian occupation soldiers in the final stages of the war. *Dresden* discusses Germans as victims of Allied fire bombings of German cities. While these two situations depict primarily German followers and bystanders as victims, *Der Vorleser* turns even a perpetrator into a victim.

By focusing on German wartime suffering, these texts, their film adaptations, and the TV mini-series contribute to the *Opferdebatte*. However, they approach the issue of German victimhood in different ways. *Der Vorleser* and *Dresden* not only highlight Germans as victims but they also obscure individual and collective German guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust



and other Nazi crimes. *Dresden* depicts the suffering of the German bombing victims but neglects to contextualize the event in the history of the Second World War and the Third Reich and thus suppresses the bombing victims' prior subject positions as perpetrators, bystanders and followers to Nazi atrocities. *Der Vorleser* even takes it a step further and transforms a concentration camp guard, the ultimate embodiment of a Nazi perpetrator, into a victim and the sympathetic depiction invites the audience to empathize with her. Here, too, the suffering of the Holocaust victims remains distant and abstract, and the depicted event is extrapolated from the historical context. Both the German novel and its American film adaptation minimize the Holocaust in order to enact the transition of Germany as a *Täternation* to the subject position of collective German victimhood.

*Eine Frau in Berlin* likewise contributes to the debate about German civilian victims but the diary and its film adaptation not only provide an account of the mass rapes of German women by Soviet soldiers in occupied Berlin but also contextualize these experiences in the history of the Third Reich and the Second World War. Even if only in passing, the diary and the film emphasize the fact that Germans had not only supported the war but also National Socialism and women had played important and diverse roles that ranged from followers and bystanders to perpetrators. However, the film fails in portraying the magnitude and extreme brutality of the mass rapes and casts revenge as the sole cause which exculpates the Russian soldiers to a significant extent from their crime. Although German soldiers committed similar and worse crimes, it is deeply unethical to cast the rapes as a balancing of scores.

Not only did I analyze how these cultural artifacts were (re)constructing Germans as victims but I also explored how audiences consume them to understand how the potential of transforming collective German memory is actualized in the reception process. The analysis

examined official memory via newspaper reviews as well as teaching materials and vernacular memory via responses from viewers and readers to explore how the German public engages with the discursive transformation of Germans into victims.

Official responses to the cultural artifacts are numerous and diverse as they have been reviewed in a wide array of newspaper and web articles. Newspaper and web reviews of *Dresden* were largely laudatory and did not detect the revanchist impulses in the mini-series but, on the contrary, even argued that the suffering of the bombing victims was trivialized and Germans represented too negatively. Likewise, both *Der Vorleser* and its film adaptation received predominantly laudatory official reviews. The novel was a significant critical and commercial success, and it was only in 2002 that it began to be criticized for depicting a Nazi perpetrator as a victim. However, this criticism was not reflected in the majority of movie reviews. For Anonyma's *Eine Frau in Berlin*, reviews were consistently positive until journalist Jens Bisky ignited a debate about the diary's authenticity. Reviews generally considered the mass rapes to balance the score between German crimes and German suffering, which is an unethically relativizing claim. The likewise mostly positive official responses to the film, on the other hand, comment on the fact that the movie draws attention to the issue of systematic mass rape during wartime while at the same time reinforcing the notion that Germans were perpetrators, followers and bystanders first.

The teaching materials that are designed to discuss these popular culture artifacts in the *Gymnasium* and *Realschule* display a highly problematic treatment of this part of German history and thus support the claim, both overtly and covertly, that many Germans also constitute victims of the Third Reich and the Second World War. The teaching material for the film adaptation of *Eine Frau in Berlin* does not succeed in contextualizing the suffering of German women in the

history of World War II. While one online teaching guide, developed by Tanja Seider, at least tries to find a balance between focusing on the violent rape of German women at the end of the war and avoiding to depict them solely as innocent victims, the *Filmheft* out rightly ignores the historical circumstances that have led to the occupation and to the violence against German women. The didactic materials for *Der Vorleser* show similar shortcomings. Although there is ample teaching material available, both online and in book form, for the novel, as well as the *Filmheft* for the movie adaptation, none of the examined teaching guides discusses the novel or the film in the context of coming to terms with the history of the Holocaust and the Third Reich. They refrain from criticizing Hanna's transformation from a perpetrator into a victim and how this reinterpretation of a German perpetrator in the novel and film functions in the *Opferdebatte*. The same alarming tendency can be seen in student generated websites which indicate that students tend to perceive Hanna predominantly if not solely as a victim and at the same time lose sight of the suffering of the Holocaust victims. The *Filmheft* created for *Dresden* is equally problematic. The teaching guide's treatment of German wartime suffering is highly questionable since it refrains from contextualizing the firebombing within the context of World War II and thus not only ignores previous history that has led to the bombing but also collective German responsibility for Nazi crimes. All teaching guides exhibit a significant shift from understanding Germans as perpetrators, followers and bystanders to remembering them predominantly as victims which constitutes a highly problematic turn in how teachers and students are instructed to discuss this core part of German history. This is particularly disconcerting with regard to *Der Vorleser*, since the novel is an integral part of the German school curriculum in several federal states.

As is apparent from the numerous vernacular responses to the popular culture artifacts, there is a definite need to discuss German civilian war victims and a significant interest in these representations of German victimhood. This interest in this topic makes these media products commercially successful, which generates a high probability that more similar films and texts will be created, and it means that these artifacts have significant influence on how the Third Reich is remembered in Germany. Irrespective of whether they reviewed the texts and/or films positively or critically, viewers and readers welcome the opportunity to finally discuss German wartime suffering publicly since the subject had been taboo in official German discourse until the mid-1990s and had only been present on the discursive margins of right-wing organizations like the *Vertriebenenverbände* and in the communicative memory of family stories in the private sphere (Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall 2002). Communicative memory generated a different picture of the past than Germany's official cultural memory. While official collective memory highlights German guilt and responsibility for Nazi crimes, communicative memory was dominated by German victimhood.

However, the need to discuss German wartime suffering does not have to necessarily entail a revisionist perspective and, in fact, most comments by viewers and readers do not seek to apologetically whitewash the past or to balance the score between Jewish and German victims. Particularly the vernacular responses to *Eine Frau in Berlin* stress that Germans were perpetrators, followers and bystanders first before many also became victims. They praise that Anonyma was able to depict the suffering of the women while acknowledging, if only briefly, the Nazi crimes and the bystander status of Germans like herself. While most vernacular responses to the film adaptation of *Eine Frau in Berlin* reinforce the notion that Germans were perpetrators, followers and bystanders first, and some reviewers even advocated that German

civilian suffering should not be commemorated at all because it pales in comparison to the suffering caused by Germans, reader comments to the book show a tendency to exculpate followers and bystanders and to blame only a small number of high-ranking Nazis, a notion which is in sync with the dominant discourse of the *Opferdebatte*. The mitigating tendencies are taken even further in *Der Vorleser*, which nevertheless, or maybe rather therefore, received almost solely positive feedback from viewers and readers, who seem either oblivious to or embrace its revisionist agenda, despite the fact that the novel and its film adaptation depict even a concentration camp guard as a victim. Audiences welcomed, sometimes rather naively, that *Der Vorleser* focuses on a perpetrator rather than on a victim and that Hanna is depicted in a way that invites empathy and not as a stereotypical camp guard.

Probably owing to its genre as a made-for-TV movie, *Dresden* most likely had by far the widest audience. This and the fact that unlike the other texts and films it had its own internet discussion forum generated by far the most viewer responses. Viewers criticized the mini-series harshly and argued that focusing on the kitschy love story trivialized the horrific bombing of the city and the suffering of those who experienced it. Compared to Anonyma's diary and Schlink's novel as well as their film adaptations, *Dresden* also received the most responses with revisionist content. Barring further research, the reason why the *TV-Event Movie* evoked more comments that employ an ahistorical rhetoric of victimization and take the Allied bombardment as evidence of collective German victimhood can only be subject to speculation. While the gender-specific rape of German women was experienced only by a smaller number of the population and constituted a taboo because of the sexual nature of the victimization, the fire bombings of German cities was the most overtly visible form of German suffering as many cities had been reduced to rubble and important monuments serve as reminders of the destructive

bombardments. The ruins of the Dresden *Frauenkirche* served as a war memorial until the 1990s. Reconstruction of its exterior took thirteen years and in October 2005 the building was reconsecrated in a widely publicized ceremony. The rebuilt church acts as a landmark symbol of reconciliation between the former war enemies. Similarly, the ruins of the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche* in Berlin, which was badly damaged in a bombing raid in 1943, have been serving as a memorial of World War II until today. In addition, the air war on German cities has been the object of many debates, not only in academia but also in the wider public sphere and in the private sphere, the communicative memories of the war in families focus generally on German suffering, and many stories about the bombings have been passed down to the next generations. And like flight and expulsion, the firebombing of German cities is a dominant subject in right-wing organizations who not only falsify the historic facts but also hype and exploit the historical event for their own ends. Until today, this particular situation of German suffering constitutes an important part of collective memory which could be an explanation why *Dresden* not only received such a large feedback but also caused heated debates and evoked extreme and often very emotional reactions that reflect the whole political spectrum.

The immense commercial and critical success of popular culture artifacts like Schlink's *Der Vorleser*, Anonyma's *Eine Frau in Berlin*, their film adaptations and the made-for-TV movie *Dresden* indicates that popular cultural media play an important role in shaping German collective memory and influencing historical consciousness. I thus disagree with Jeffrey I. Roth (2004) who argues that we do not derive history from fictional representations. In his article "Reading and Misreading *The Reader*," Roth states that "we do not derive history from novels. The fear that fiction will displace document and archive is exaggerated" (57). If he only included

historians, who indeed learn about the past from documents and archives, in his unspecified notion of 'we,' he would be right. However, audiences beyond academics in general and historians in particular, do precisely learn about history from the popular media like television, commercial cinema and popular literature as they are widely consumed and thus have the greatest influence on how a national past is remembered. Highbrow memory artifacts like professional historiography reach only a small percentage of the general public (Kansteiner 2006). As I have sought to demonstrate, popular media reach the widest audience and hence have the greatest influence on shaping a society's collective memory. I agree with Wulf Kansteiner (2006) and Anton Kaes (1990), who argue that film and television have become the most effective artifacts for shaping collective memory and historical consciousness, but would extend the argument to also include popular literature. Popular culture media are far more influential than historiography, public debates, museums, memorial sites and/or formal education. Among the media of popular culture, television is by far the most influential of the German population's historical consciousness. When *Eine Frau in Berlin* was re-released in 2003, the publishing house Eichborn sold approximately 140.000 copies in Germany. The feature film *Anonyma – Eine Frau in Berlin* reached a mere 40.000 viewers in Germany. And while the Hollywood film adaption of Schlink's *Der Vorleser* was seen by 2.2 million German viewers and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang*, which is one of the most successful German films produced for the cinema, even attracted 4.6 million German viewers, TV productions generate far greater audiences. *Dresden* reached between 11.3 and 12.7 million viewers and other made-for-TV movies about German wartime suffering likewise reached much greater audiences not only than popular literature but also than commercial cinema. *Die Gustloff* (ZDF, 2008) reached 8.45 million viewers, *Die Luftbrücke* (Sat1, 2005) 8.4 Millionen, and the ARD two-part series *Die*

*Flucht* (2007) even attracted 13 million spectators. And while *Die Kinder der Flucht* (ZDF, 2006) and *Der Hungerwinter* (ARD, 2009) show lower *Einschaltquoten* with 3.5 million and 4.13 million viewers respectively, they still surpass most feature films produced for the cinema. As these numbers show, television has by far the greatest impact on shaping Germany's collective memory and therefore is an undeservedly neglected medium in German studies. As Kansteiner (2006) convincingly argued, anyone seeking to explore German collective memory ought to analyze television and its large-scale reception.

I choose to conclude my dissertation by discussing briefly four topics that struck me as particularly important when I was working on this project. And with these concluding thoughts, I point to a number of different areas for future research in regard to the discursive interaction of the *Opferdebatte* and popular culture:

1. German Wartime Suffering and the German School Curricula: Teaching material is such an important tool for shaping the collective memory of young Germans. In order to find out how teachers incorporate civilian German victimhood into the history of the Second World War and the Third Reich, research should explore if and how the school curricula for the various federal states include literary texts, cinema and television programs that depict Germans as victims of World War II, e.g. *Der Vorleser* is part of many German school curricula. The analysis should include a) official curricular and didactic materials and commentaries for teachers and/or students b) teaching material and/or student aids that can be found in the internet, c) student generated websites, d) syllabi and lesson plans. In addition, it could be illuminating to interview teachers and/or students about their classroom experiences and/or to observe classroom



interaction because, as Kansteiner (2006) argued with regard to films and literary texts, the artifacts only signify a potential that needs to be actualized in the reception.

2. The Depiction of Germans as Victims in made-for-TV Movies: German civilian victimhood is a dominant subject in contemporary TV productions, as the new television genres of the *TV-Event Movie* and the so-called *Dokudrama* about flight and expulsion, the bombing of German cities and the sinking of the refugee ship “Wilhelm Gustloff,” among many others, indicate. As mentioned above, television reaches the widest audience, which makes TV programs the most important medium for generating Germany’s collective memory of the Second World War and the Third Reich. Therefore it is important to analyze how they represent German wartime suffering.

3. Guido Knopp’s Documentaries: German journalist, historian and head of the ZDF History Department Guido Knopp has made several dozen highly (melo)dramatic and sentimental ‘pop documentaries’ since the mid 1990s, many of which represent German wartime suffering. No other type of historical programming has even come remotely close to the many million consumers of Knopp’s popular documentaries, which have consequently had a significant influence on shaping many German collective memory.

4. Beyond the *Opferdebatte*: Transforming Germans into Heroes: A new addition to the discourse about German victimhood is the depiction of Germans and even high-ranking Nazis in the figure of ‘the good German’ by juxtaposing them to a minute number of flat-character evil Nazis. For example, *Der Untergang* (2002), which narrates the last twelve days of the Third Reich, is the first major movie to represent Germans, including high-ranking Nazis, as heroes. The figure of the good-at-heart and humane SS officer and doctor Schenk, who is depicted as a (tragic) hero, is contrasted with larger-than-life villains, like Hitler and Goebbels. Guido

Knopp's *Hitler's Krieger* (1998) and *Stalingrad* (2003) likewise glorify the German military in their depiction of heroically fighting ordinary soldiers as martyrs when they were sacrificed by cowardly, incompetent and evil Nazi leaders and heroic army generals who not only tried to save their men in battle and sought to convince Hitler of the futility of further fighting, some of whom even attempted to assassinate the *Führer*. Consequently, the popular documentaries efface the crimes of the German military particularly on the Eastern front, where the *Wehrmacht* was actively involved in crimes against the civilian population, and hence obliterate the question of German guilt.

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**Abstract****THE CULTURAL MEMORY OF GERMAN VICTIMHOOD IN POST-1990 POPULAR  
GERMAN LITERATURE AND TELEVISION**

by

**ANJA PAULINE EBERT****August 2010****Advisor:** Dr. Anne Rothe**Major:** Modern Languages**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

My dissertation analyzes the representation of Germans as victims of the Third Reich and the Second World War in post-1990 German memory. After unification, there no longer were two states that could each blame the other as the heir of National Socialism and this past had to be renegotiated. The claim that many Germans had been victims became central as evidenced by the vast number of popular literature, commercial cinema and television programs of this subject. I argue with Wulf Kansteiner (2006) that to understand collective memory, we should explore mass media representations. As the majority of highbrow artifacts do not reach the general public, only interpretations of the past that become part of the mainstream media influence historical consciousness. My discussion therefore analyzes both popular literature and television as well as their official and vernacular reception.

After contextualizing the dissertation in the increasingly expansive discourse of cultural memory, and briefly tracing the discursive history of West German cultural memory since 1945, the core of the dissertation explores the cultural memory of Germans as victims embodied in and

disseminated through post-unification popular cultural artifacts. I explore the representation of German women as rape victims in Anonyma's *Eine Frau in Berlin* (2003), its 2008 German film adaptation and its reception. Secondly, I analyze Bernhard Schlink's bestselling novel *Der Vorleser* (1995) and its 2009 American film, which exculpate a former concentration camp guard on the dubious grounds that her illiteracy made her morally illiterate. The textual and film analysis are likewise extended to the analysis of the reception. In the last chapter, I analyze the made-for-TV movie *Dresden* (2006), which constitutes Germany's first feature film about the British fire bombing of Dresden, and its reception.

The dissertation examines how each artifact transforms Germans from bystanders, followers and even perpetrators into victims. Since the artifacts themselves only contain the potential to shape historical consciousness, which needs to be actualized in the reception process, I primarily explore how these media products are interpreted in newspaper reviews and teaching materials (official reception) as well as in online postings of readers and viewers (vernacular reception).

### Autobiographical Statement

Anja Pauline Ebert was born and raised in Frankfurt/Main Germany. She earned a *Magister Artium* in *Germanistik*, Psychology and Political Science from the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main in 2001. From August 2002 to 2003 she worked as a teacher for the German Supplementary School of DaimlerChrysler at Tuscaloosa, Alabama and subsequently completed Masters Degree in German Studies at the University of Alabama in spring 2004. Anja Pauline Ebert was a PhD student in the Department of Classical and Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Wayne State University from 2004 to 2010. Her research interests include 20th-century German literature and culture, in particular the representation of the Third Reich and the Holocaust in literature, television and film. She has presented her research at local, regional and national conferences, and was a Graduate Teaching Assistant for nine semesters and an Educational and Technology Assistant for the Basic German Language Program for two semesters.