

WWII in Contemporary German National and Nationalist Discourses

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(1) Introduction: Apologia and Redemption in Recent WWII Films

The forest is suddenly quiet, nearly peaceful. The only sounds that can be heard are the distant cries of the Polish partisans who are being captured and shot by the Germans. His face almost hidden under his helmet, his rifle pressed to his chin, and the voice of his *Standartenführer* Hiemer counting down, the *Wehrmacht* soldier is about to shoot his Jewish friend. It is a sadistic ritual. Earlier, the SS-officer had counted down for the soldier to shoot a Polish child or hang civilians as alleged partisans. During the hanging, the SD officer took pictures documenting the soldier's involvement while the townspeople were forced to look on. Though his SS-seducer's presence explains much of his cruelty, the soldier's participation in these crimes as bystander, participant and increasingly as instigator of violence is beyond any doubt. Yet, even as viewers are stunned by his transformation from a bookish young man into a disillusioned murderer, they sense that the soldier, unlike the SS-officer, is not innately evil. Repeatedly, the narrative of the German public television miniseries *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (UMUV 2013) wraps the soldier's actions in apologetic explanations, and viewers only gradually learn that he fell victim to the brutalizing effect of the war and the seductive power of the regime. Yet, during this dramatic moment in July 1944, when the soldier, Friedhelm Winter, trains his gun at his childhood friend from better days in Berlin, the outcome is far from certain. As *Standartenführer* Hiemer counts one, then two, Friedhelm fires early. Will he redeem himself by shooting this grotesquely stereotypical Nazi villain, or will he kill his friend Viktor Goldstein? Unnoticed by Hiemer, Viktor and

the audience, Friedhelm quickly adjusts the aim of his rifle ever so slightly. The shot wizzes by Viktor, and viewers see Hiemer collapse, spitting blood. Resuming his mask of a battle-hardened soldier, Friedhelm turns to Viktor and tells him to shove off and save himself while viewers are likely to understand that he had retained his humanity in this crucial scene and accept this as the moment of his redemption.

The intense scene from *UMUV* speaks volumes about the desires of today's audiences for apologia and redemption to help them grapple with the fact that ordinary Germans, their parents or grandparents, were often co-perpetrators, accomplices, beneficiaries or bystanders to the regime's crimes. Series such as *UMUV* also raise questions about how to remember and represent ordinary Germans as co-perpetrators while not discarding all-too-familiar narratives of ordinary Germans as victims of a war they helped to unleash. Given the ubiquity of similar themes in recent TV productions on the war, and in view of their success, apologia and redemption have become part of the national discourse on the past.¹ This paper argues that such a national narrative helps Germans to accept the complicity of their forbearers, but its apologetic and redemptive tenets also inadvertently embolden those who want to rewrite history altogether. In the nationalist reading of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), apologia then morphs into glorification of ordinary German and redemption leads to denying the need to work through the past altogether.

(2) The Miniseries *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (UMUV)

UMUV follows five young Germans, friends, whose fates – as *Wehrmacht* soldiers, as a nurse, as an aspiring show-star and as a Jew persecuted by the regime – remain intertwined throughout the war. The three part miniseries evokes empathy with the

¹ See for example: Tannbach, ZFD 2015, Die Flucht, ADT 2007, Die Gustloff, ZDF 2008 to name a few.

suffering of the German war generation without casting any doubt on their complicity in the horrors of war and genocide. The afore-mentioned soldier Friedhelm Winter morphs into a ruthless murderer of civilians as alleged partisans, becoming a co-principal or co-perpetrator in this crime (Lepora and Goodin 2016, 33). His brother, *Leutnant* Wilhelm Winter, executes the infamous *Kommissarbefehl* and looks on while his men at Friedhelm's suggestion drive Russian civilians in front of them to clear a minefield. His unwillingness to stop his brother and his own men in the murder the civilians constitutes a case of complicity, since the consequences of his inaction were all too clear to him and he benefits from the crime. Charlotte, a nurse indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda, also becomes a co-principal in Nazi crimes when she betrays a Russian nurse's aide as Jewish seemingly committing her to certain death. Greta sleeps with an SS-Officer hoping to protect their Jewish friend Viktor Goldstein and in order to promote her own singing career with the help of the officer's influential Nazi contacts. Even though her intention to save Victor were good, she willingly becomes a tool for Nazi propaganda thus also turning into an accomplice and beneficiary of the regime. In this sense, all of the non-Jewish protagonists become co-perpetrators, accomplices, witnesses and beneficiaries of Nazi crimes, yet the series make clear that they are also victims. Greta and Friedhelm even lose their lives, while Victor, Wilhelm and Charlotte only narrowly escape death.

(3) Themes in UMUV

In showing ordinary Germans both as perpetrators and victims, the miniseries seeks to overcome the sharp divide between the learned discourse on coming to terms with the past and the long tradition of self-perception of Germans as victims (Kansteiner 2006

182). The films' efforts to portray their protagonists' culpability and complicity is all the more praiseworthy as the producers Nico Hoffmann (born 1959) and Philip Kadelbach (1974) engage scholarship on the complicity of ordinary Germans. It is particularly noteworthy that this includes complicity of Germans not only at the frontlines (Bartov 1992, Johnson and Reuband 2005, 226-59, Friedländer 2002) but also at home (Koonz 2013, 17, Aly 2007, 36). Normal, likeable young German men and women neither too close nor opposed to the regime thus appear simultaneously as perpetrators, accomplices and as victims of an all-powerful regime and an all-consuming war. While the filmmakers' willingness to problematize the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators is remarkable, here is where the miniseries reaches its narrative limits (Wildermuth 2016, 65). Ultimately, UMUV offers an apologetic redemption narrative that explains the complicity of ordinary Germans only with reference to the seductive power of the regime and the brutality of war. The miniseries is thus quick to cite orders or military necessity, the horrors of war, naiveté or personal ambition as reasons for their heroes' actions. If apologetic themes dominate the portrayal of the protagonists, stereotypical SS villains serve as negative foils to highlight the humanity of the heroes and heroines even in the face of atrocity. Yet, the miniseries also categorically acquits its protagonists from sexual and, what Jan Philip Reemtsma called, *autotelic* violence (2009, 116), even though the wire-tappings of German soldiers in American captivity found recently by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer reveal that ordinary Germans often murdered arbitrarily and raped with gusto (Neitzel and Welzer 2011). These forms of violence would display the protagonists' agency, lust and self-empowerment in the victimization of others, which would render them unacceptable to viewers today. Furthermore, the miniseries includes

various hardly plausible twists to show that the main characters redeem themselves through their suffering, their belated self-liberation from the regime, and their sincere repentance. In an act of self-liberation, Wilhelm Winter deserts from the *Wehrmacht*, and Friedhelm Winter kills his sadistic Nazi seducer in the scene described at the beginning of this article, while his older brother also gets a chance to slay the Nazi beast. He kills a brutal *Oberfeldwebel* in charge of the penal unit to which he is assigned after his desertion. As such, this highly successful series with a market share of 20-25% (Classen 2014, 53) seeks to fulfill, not go against the expectations of contemporary audiences, who are willing to accept the participation, though not the agency of ordinary Germans in Nazi crimes. Yet, ordinary Germans clearly made few, if any attempts to liberate themselves from the regime and had, before the late 1960s, failed to offer any meaningful ways of confronting the past, still thinking of themselves as the primary victims of war and Nazism (Moeller 2001, 118). UMUV thus epitomizes the current state of coming to terms with the past in Germany, which, despite its great strides to create public awareness and acceptance of German guilt, has moved little beyond apologia and added gratuitous redemption when it comes to telling the story of ordinary Germans.

(4) Taboo Crimes: Anti-Semitism, Sexual and Autotelic Violence

For audiences to relate to the main characters, the miniseries has to distance them from anti-Semitism and from sexual and autotelic violence (Reemtsma 2008, 182 and 359). These forms of violence are taboo in modern society and breaking them would destroy the bond between the audience and the protagonists that even the German title of UMUV “our mothers, our fathers” seeks to generate. The producers carefully shield the main

characters from all too fervent anti-Semitism, and the violence they commit must not be motivated by racial hatred. Likewise, sexual violence that seeks to brutalize and enslave a female body, or autotelic violence that serves no other purpose but the pleasure of the person exercising it are also taboo. Violence as perpetrated by the protagonists can only be the result of their personal weaknesses to withstand the pressures caused by peers and superiors, or to vent their own frustrations at the deprivation and suffering in the war. Racial hatred, sexual deviance or random violence would render them beyond apologia and redemption and thus unacceptable to audiences today.

While other soldiers or minor characters often invoke anti-Semitic phrases, the protagonists refrain from that. None of their crimes seem to be linked to anti-Semitism or racial hatred, as such passion is externalized onto SS villains or, even more problematically, to foreigners. Ultimately, *UMUV* only charges SS thugs, Ukrainian volunteers and even the Polish partisans with anti-Semitism and – with the exception of Charlotte as the youngest and most naive protagonist in *UMUV* – none of the central characters. Particularly the close association of Polish partisans with anti-Semitism caused outrage in Poland (Sariusz-Wolska and Piorun 2014). As far as the main characters in *UMUV* are concerned, their common friendship with a Jew largely absolves them from anti-Semitism.

If anti-Semitism is externalized to apply to minor German characters and to Polish partisans, sexual violence also remains reserved to Soviet soldiers raping German women, even though ordinary Germans also committed countless rapes. Not surprisingly, neither the sexual violence committed at random by German soldiers knowing that they would not get punished by their superiors (Mühlhäuser 2010, 140), nor the variants of

forced prostitution either in the *Wehrmacht*'s own brothels (Meinen 2002, 82ff.) or through the mass starvation created by German occupation are problematized (Beckermann 1998, 102f.).

As anti-Semitism and sexual violence are glossed over or externalized, autotelic violence also plays no role in the films. In fact, UMUV makes sure to stress that the protagonists committed war crimes only because they were acting on orders or as a response to attacks from others, mostly partisans, but not randomly. After a deadly attack on German soldiers, Friedhelm Winter in UMUV takes part in a shooting of civilians. Yet, the series suggests that this shooting was not random, but that the civilians participated or at least had knowledge of the attack, which dilutes the fact that the *Wehrmacht* often arbitrarily shot civilians from nearby houses without any evidence of their involvement (Hartmann 2010, 727). Wilhelm Winter had noticed that Russian civilians were herding their children away from a well in which the bomb was placed. Before he could warn his men, the blast went off, killing two soldiers (UMUV Part II, 15:11). The reality of such reprisals, however, was that officers from the Battalion commander up could order random measures of “collective punishment” and that Soviet civilians were denied legal protection against crimes committed by *Wehrmacht* soldiers in accordance with the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlass im Osttheer* of 1941 (Römer 2008, 55f and 99). Jews in particular were almost by default considered partisans and thus likely targets of such barbaric reprisals.

Even if the protagonists in UMUV seem to be immune against autotelic violence, the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* – its participation in the Holocaust, the deliberate starvation of Soviet prisoners of war, and the ruthless murder and plunder of the civilian population –

were clearly accompanied by indiscriminate and random violence against civilians. This autotelic violence cannot be explained by pointing to the regime only as a facilitator; it was rather that the regime's orders coincided with the soldier's own racism, the knowledge that even the most barbaric acts would not be punished, as well as the pleasure they derived through violence. This seems evident from the wiretappings of German soldiers in American captivity found by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer that recorded private conversations between soldiers. These documents show the broad knowledge, acceptance, and participation of ordinary soldiers in the German murders in the east. In addition, soldiers sometimes even boasted with sexual and autotelic violence either perpetrated or observed by themselves. In these instances, the prisoner of war starting this conversation often assumed that his comrade, whom he did not know most of the time, had similar experiences, and at least the reference frame of war and violence was not alien to him (Neitzel and Welzer 2011, 88ff.). Since audiences today could hardly tolerate such indiscriminate violence in their (grand)mothers or (grand)fathers, the miniseries must acquit their protagonists from autotelic or sexual violence and downplay base anti-Semitism. It is in this context that the movies resort to all-too-familiar apologetic narrative patterns.

(5) Apologia

In contrast to anti-Semitism, sexual, and autotelic violence, orders by members of a small, but murderous elite, seduction by the regime and its propaganda, and the brutalization of soldiers at war are much more acceptable explanations for the complicity of the films' protagonists. Yet, it is also through these apologetic explanations that the

protagonists morph into victims of larger events. Not surprisingly, thus, the miniseries downplays its central characters' agency. UMUV does not problematize the fact that ordinary Germans succumbed to the seduction of the regime also through shameless self-promotion and self-enrichment. The miniseries also fails to acknowledge that Germans became co-perpetrators as bystanders and beneficiaries of the persecution of Jews and others well before the brutalization of war could have any effect on them (Aly 2007, 36). Nor is there any discussion in the series about agency of soldiers in view of murderous commands, even though we know that some soldiers refused such orders with few consequences for themselves or their careers. In this book 'Ordinary Men', Browning recounts the famous choice of shooting or not shooting that *Major* Wilhelm Trapp gave the men in his Police Battalion 101 when the unit was tasked with the murder of the Jews of Józefów in July 1942. Even though his men had every reason to believe in the sincerity of the offer coming from a man they fondly called "Papa Trapp", few of them opted out. As promised, they faced no repercussions afterwards. Browning concludes:

Was the incident at Józefów typical? Certainly not. I know of no other case in which a commander so openly invited and sanctioned the nonparticipation of his men in a killing action. But in the end the most important fact is not that the experience of Reserve Police Battalion 101 was untypical, but rather that Trapp's extraordinary offer did not matter. Like any other unit, Reserve Police Battalion 101 killed the Jews they had been told to kill. (1992, 183)

In the situation discussed by Browning, the perpetrators could be certain that they would not get punished for opting out, yet even those who did take risks to rescue Jews against the expressed desires of their superiors faced few repercussions. Saul Friedländer reports a case of a *Wehrmacht* Officer who tried to save Jewish orphans from death and whose intervention did not result in negative consequences for himself (2002, 36). Surely only few individuals had the wherewithal to withstand the power of command and peer

pressure, but these episodes show that they had more agency than the series show. In addition to participating under duress, many German soldiers needed little encouragement and sometimes themselves even took up the initiative to murder, thus becoming part of Nazi Germany's genocidal mission. As such, the series employs abstract explanations – the lure and the power of the regime, the brutalization of war and power of command – to employ highly apologetic narratives that exculpate the individual in the mealstrom of greater events.

Seduction by the regime also shapes the story of Greta, an aspiring show star in UMUV. She succumbs to the lure of the regime in the person of the ruthless Gestapo Officer Dorn who promotes her stage career in exchange for sexual favors. Yet, she enters this affair not only with her career in mind. She also wants the Gestapo Officer to give Viktor, her lover and the group's friend, safe passage to the United States, and tries to blackmail Dorn when she learns that she is carrying his child. Betrayed by Dorn, who reveals himself not only as a ruthless murderer but also kills his own unborn child, she falls out of grace and dies a lonely death in a Gestapo prison shortly before the end of the war. While engaging the idea of self-enrichment through literally sleeping with the enemy, the movie cloaks this act of submission to the Nazis for personal gain into an acceptable story of trying to protect her Jewish partner. What is more, her story then leads to acts of resistance when she inquires about the fate of Viktor's parents and suffering at the hands of the Nazi villain with her walking down a cold prison aisle in a rugged white shirt symbolizing her innocence.

The story of the other female lead in UMUV, Charlotte, a nurse on the Eastern Front, also compells the audience to accept apologetic notions around seduction of the regime and

feel compassion for her suffering. Her indoctrination with Nazi ideology is quickly explained with reference to her impressionable young age and her naive idealism. Even though she exposes a Russian nurse's aide as Jewish to the Gestapo, she too retains her humanity through her heartfelt regret of her actions, through an act of resistance making sure that German wounded soldiers do not return to the frontlines immediately, and her later attempts to protect another Russian nurse's aide. After being captured and nearly raped by Soviet soldiers, she also does active penance by working in a Soviet field hospital as a nurses' aide, now healing the wounds of those hurt by the German invasion that she was part of. Just like Wilhelm Winter, she becomes disillusioned with the war, the regime, and her own complicity, and like Wilhelm, she too has a negative counterpart.

Hildegard, a more vindictive nurse threatens to exposes her actions as defeatism:

That is defeatism. I should report you. Do you think that the Russians will spare you, if they win?" Charlotte, "I thought you believed in final victory." Hildegard: "In what else [...] If we lose the war, can you imagine what they will do to us?" (UMUV Part III, 24:03)

Charlotte becomes a co-perpetrator through events larger than herself and the indoctrination of the regime, and similar to Wilhelm she overcomes her guilt through an act of resistance, her suffering and sincere repentance.

Reference to the seductive power of the regime offers an apologetic narrative framework explaining the complicity of the protagonists, yet so does the brutalization in war. The war, though clearly an inextricable frame of reference for all contemporaries, becomes an agent of corruption constantly invoked by the repeated phrase in UMUV that "the war will only bring out the worst in us" (UMUV, Part I: 7:12 and 67:22, Part II 49:00). The horrors of war and the pressures of command and discipline as explanation for the brutalization of German soldiers, an argument that the UMUV seems to take directly

from Omer Bartov's work, comes particularly to the fore in the character of *Leutnant* Wilhelm Winter. The brutalization in war, especially seeing one of his men blown up by a mine, and military necessity to reach safer quarters explain why he does not prevent his men from driving Russian civilians through a mine-infested marsh. He also follows a standing order when shooting a Soviet Commissar, and he orders the execution of civilians only after it seems clear that they know of a bomb planted in a well that killed two of his men. Yet, the audience also sees how he tries to protect a Jewish girl from the certain slaughter by Ukrainian volunteers who were acting on the orders of a notorious and sadistic SS villain. He also saves Russian prisoners of war from his own soldiers who were seeking retaliation for the death of some of their own in battle. His actions – even his crimes – therefore must be seen in the context of following orders, of a strong sense of duty, and of concern for his men and occasionally even determined humanity. As such, he closely resembles his cinematic predecessors *Leutnant* von Witzland in Josef Vilsmaier *Stalingrad* (1993) and *Leutnant* Wisse in Frank Wisbars *Dogs Do You Want to Live Forever* (1959). In analogy to these two movie lieutenants, Winter also later deserts and refuses criminal orders to show his estrangement from the regime. This alienation is even further highlighted when he – again just like Wisse and von Witzland – kills a Nazi henchman. Returning to Berlin a broken and disillusioned man, he pays a high price for his earlier complicity. The image of the respectable and brave officer who retains his humanity, renounces the regime at the last moment, and through his suffering redeems himself, therefore remains virtually unchanged from earlier silver screen representations well familiar to German audiences. As such, UMUV fails to explore the question of

personal agency vis-à-vis the larger historical contexts and wraps the acts committed in apologetic narratives highlighting the influence of the regime and the war.

Perhaps the most interesting character in UMUV is Wilhelm Winter's younger brother Friedhelm, whose transformation from a shy, bookish youth to a brutal killer is the most courageous part of the movie. His brutality is, in analogy to his brother's conversion, a product of the brutalization of war, high casualties among fellow soldiers and the struggle for survival, yet more than any other character in either movie he also falls under the spell of a Nazi officer who orders him to commit atrocities. This conversion occurs after the supposed death of his older brother Wilhelm, which makes him lose the last remnants of moral behavior, and he understands his brutalization as almost inevitable. Speaking to a younger recruit, he says, "You resist the temptation to be human. Some become that way, others don't. You never know beforehand. All that is certain is that no one stays what he is." (UMUV, Part II, 53:15) The sadistic SS *Standartenführer* Hiemer replaces Friedhelm's brother, in whose unit he had served before, not just as moral influence but also as his actual commander, whose orders – in the film repeatedly emphasized by Hiemer counting until Friedhelm is to shoot – he follows. Friedhelm's innocence is therefore a victim of the war, the lack of moral authority from his brother and the result of orders. Yet, even Friedhelm's humanity is preserved despite his complicity in the orgies of violence unleashed by Hiemer. In the unlikely confrontation with Viktor and Hiemer described at the beginning of this article, he decides to shoot the SS leader instead of his friend. Just like his brother Wilhelm, this constitutes a belated act of self-liberation, which makes the stereotypical SS villain Hiemer an integral part of the story to humanize Friedhelm.

(6) Redemption

If the audience's shock about the protagonists' participation in war crimes is cushioned by apologetic narratives, the main characters in *UMUV* still redeem themselves through their self-liberation from the regime, sincere repentance and suffering. After being numbed by the enormity of the war, the four non-Jewish protagonists in *UMUV* suddenly regain agency at the end of the war, literally killing or trying to go after their Nazi tormentors. Their own suffering in the war and afterwards then is portrayed as accepted penance for their involvement in the crimes. As the audience is invited to understand the main characters' actions, admires their courageous, though belated self-liberation and feels compassion for their suffering, the protagonists retain their humanity as inescapable precondition for Germans' today to feel empathy with them. The humanity of the protagonists, however, stands in stark contrast to the easily identifiable Nazi villains whose seductive power and sadistic inhumanity caused good Germans to follow them. In this respect, the film meets the desire of later generations for simple explanations for the behaviour of their ancestors, for a self-liberation from the Nazism that never materialized and for a meaningful engagement with the past that many members of the war generation were utterly incapable of. What is more, the redemption of the protagonists becomes a metaphor for the redemption of the nation at large, which has overcome and worked through its horrible past.

(7) AfD Discourses on the Past

If *UMUV* shapes the national discourse by wrapping the complicity of ordinary Germans in war crimes and genocide in apologetics and redemption, the AfD seems to reject even this

hardly satisfying consensus on the past. Instead, prominent AfD leaders turn apologia in glorification and redemption into a rejection of a need to work through the past at all. In analogy to its anti-immigrant and Islamophobic stance, it is the ethno-nationalist wing (*der Flügel* and *Patriotische Plattform*, until September 2018) of the party that continuously radicalizes the somewhat more moderate *Alternative Mitte* also with respect to a more nationalist reading of the past of the Nazi past. (Lewandowski 2018 168). The cornerstone of this nationalist readings is the reference to the long *durée* of a seemingly glorious German history in which the 12 years of Nazi rule appear as an aberration. Party leader Alexander Gauland said in June 2018:

“We have a glorious history that lasted longer than those 12 years, and only if we recognize this history can we forge a better future. Yes, we acknowledge those 12 years (of Nazi rule). But, dear friends, Hitler and the Nazis are just a bird’s speck in our history of more than 1000 years.” (Gauland June 2018)²

This obvious attempt to relativize and downplay the Nazi past without an outright denial of its horrors is echoed by an equally unsavory call to honor the German army in WWII. Gauland thus demands the “right” for Germans to be proud of the achievements of German soldiers in both World Wars and to honor military traditions, “which exist apart from the crimes of the Wehrmacht.” In a particularly perfidious manner, he then marks not the German crimes but Germany’s attempts to comes to terms with the past as unique to conclude that Germany had “the right to not only take back our country but also our past.” (Gauland September 2018)³

² “Wir haben eine ruhmreiche Geschichte, die länger dauerte als 12 Jahre und nur wenn wir uns zu dieser Geschichte bekennen, haben wir die Kraft, die Zukunft zu gestalten Ja, wir bekennen uns zu unserer Verantwortung für die 12 Jahre. Aber, liebe Freunde, Hitler und die Nazis sind nur ein Vogelschiss in unserer über 1000-jährigen Geschichte.” (my translation).

³ „Man muss uns diese zwölf Jahre nicht mehr vorhalten. Sie betreffen unsere Identität heute nicht mehr. Und das sprechen wir auch aus. Deshalb haben wir auch das Recht, uns nicht nur unser Land, sondern auch unsere Vergangenheit zurückzuholen.“ (my translation)

If Gauland derives the right to forget the past from earlier efforts to come to terms with it, his “friend” and Thuringian party leader Björn Höcke goes even farther to demand “a 180 degree turn in memory politics” in Germany. He specifically referenced the Berlin Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, saying that the “Germans are the only people on earth who build a monument of shame in their capital.” Ignoring decades of dominant narratives depicting Germans as victims, Höcke concluded that Germans allegedly are still unable to mourn their own victims. (Höcke January 2017) In this reading, redemption has not been achieved by decades of working through the past, but rather is not necessary at all.

(8) Conclusion

The apologetic features in the representation of the main characters in UMUV are that their actions were subject to their seduction by the dictatorship, their brutalization in the horrors of war, and orders by sadistic superiors. The protagonists thus seem to retain their humanity in the eyes of Germans today even as they engage in violence. If sadistic superiors easily identifiable as textbook Nazis bring about these horrors in otherwise very relatable Germans, the actions of the miniseries’ protagonists are mirrored by the brutalization of others in this war, be that anti-Semitic Polish partisans or raping Soviet soldiers. While the miniseries acknowledges – albeit in apologetic terms – its protagonists’ active participation and complicity in war crimes, UMUS does not dare to associate them with taboo topics such as ardent anti-Semitism, sexual or autotelic violence. Peddling in apologia, UMUV thus offers few new insights while allowing narratives of Germans as victims to reappear in film for a national audience. This rather

old victim narrative is then adopted by the AfD with the added twist that allegedly Germans had been unable to mourn their own victims in the past. What is more, the AfD alleges that Germans not only failed to mourn their own victims, but also could not take pride in the performance of German soldiers. This failure to be proud of Germany, according to the AfD, equally applies to all of Germany's history.

In addition to apologia, UMUV also trades in redemption. The central characters liberate themselves from the regime through often courageous acts of self-liberation and offer penance for their crimes. Their own suffering also redeems them. This reveals the same need of filmmakers and the audience – apologia and redemption to cope with the active participation and complicity of the war generation in heinous crimes. In accepting this narrative, viewers unwittingly become complicit themselves in an act of self-awarded redemption brought forth by emotionally appealing, entertaining and powerful media productions. (Pfister 2000, 615) What is more, if redemption is achieved, the process of coming to terms with the past is largely complete, which inadvertently gives credence to Gauland's call that Germans after years of working through the past should now focus more on past achievements rather than past crimes. Yet, a self-liberation from the regime did not occur, and redemption can only come through the painful and not completed the process of coming to terms with the past.

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