

Schutzengel (Guardian Angel): New film promotes German military

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Directed by Til Schweiger, written by Schweiger, Stephen Butchard and Paul Maurice

The Berlin premiere of the new film *Schutzengel* (*Guardian Angel*), directed by Til Schweiger, was attended not only by the usual array of celebrities, but also by a delegation from the German army [*Bundeswehr*] led by Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière. The presence of the military was no accident, but signified the public confirmation of a new alliance.

The main figures in the film are a 15-year-old orphan Nina (Luna Schweiger) and German Afghan war veteran Max Fischer (Til Schweiger). Nina, eyewitness to a crime, is scheduled to testify in court as a key witness. Weapons dealer Backer (Heiner Lauterbach) is out to prevent her appearance in court at all costs, while Max, who has left the army and now works as a bodyguard, is commissioned to protect Nina.

Max and Nina first flee to Max's best friend Rudi (Moritz Bleibtreu), severely injured in Afghanistan, and then to his ex-girl-friend Sara (Karoline Schuch), who is naturally still in love with him. After innumerable shootouts that leave most of the leading figures either dead or dying, the film ends with Backer blown up by a car bomb and Fischer resigning from his job.

Schutzengel, which shot to the top of the German box office in its first weekend, is primarily distinguished by its cynicism and clichéd story telling. Every aspect of the plot is predictable, the protagonists are caricatures and the dialogue is poor. Seeking to win the empathy of the viewer, the film repeatedly slides into embarrassing triviality. Director Schweiger, a leading German actor, has sought so slavishly to copy his American idols that the drama repeatedly descends into unintentional comedy.

The film's website features a promotional video recorded in Mazar-I-Sharif, a German military base in Afghanistan, where soldiers were able to attend four pre-premieres. Schweiger and his film crew were flown in at the expense of the Bundeswehr. The video shows German soldiers praising Schweiger as "one of us" and describing *Schutzengel* as "moving", "very credible" and a reflection of "our reality".

The film, shot in Berlin and Brandenburg, focuses exclusively on war and violence. War is presented as an integral part of human society, everyday life as a setting for brutal excesses and a battleground where those who survive are skilled in the business of professional killing. *Schutzengel* never probes the causes of war. The global economic crisis and its consequences are entirely absent.

The German military is pursuing clear political objectives by selecting Schweiger's film as a new advertising medium. Following its recent transformation from a conscript army to a professional army, the recruitment of volunteers in Germany is progressing slower than expected. The recent decision of the German Constitutional Court to legalize military interventions within the country in "exceptional situations of catastrophic proportions" has met with considerable criticism.

Two world wars and the terrors of fascism are still deeply engraved in the consciousness of the German population. The war crime committed in the Afghan town of Kunduz where more than 140 people, mostly civilians, were killed at the command of a German army colonel in 2009 is not forgotten. Polls clearly indicate that the overwhelming majority of Germans oppose not only the war in Afghanistan, but any military action abroad.

Thus the Bundeswehr now turns to a show business

ally with two important assets: first, Schweiger, whose career as an actor began in the popular comedy *Manta, Manta* (1991), has for several years appealed to a large, predominantly youthful audience. As producer and director of a number of romantic comedies, he has access to an important target group for the Bundeswehr.

Second, Schweiger has moved increasingly to the right politically in recent years. His anti-democratic views have been common knowledge in film circles for some time. Even though his films are publicly funded by millions of euros (*Guardian Angel* received more than 3 million), he has excluded most media representatives from previews of his movies, restricting access to those journalists he knows will report positively about him.

In public, Schweiger has established himself as a right-wing advocate of law and order polices primarily through appearances on television talk shows. On an NDR (state-run northern German television) talk show he summed up his view of the persecution of Jews in the Third Reich: “Those [Jews] who were not smart enough to beat it got killed, the others who were smart enough took off and enriched the American film business”.

This mockery of millions of Jewish concentration camp victims has not prevented the NDR from engaging Schweiger as leading actor in four episodes of the popular *Tatort* television series, guaranteeing him an audience of millions. The methods he will employ as a Hamburg police officer were revealed by his future director and *Lethal Weapons* fan Christian Alvar, who told the media: “Til Schweiger won’t knock at a door, he’ll break it down”.

Having been slammed by serious critics, Schweiger likes to present himself to the public as a lone wolf, swimming against the current. In reality, he is riding a wave of cheap populism and enjoys the support of powerful and financially strong partners. The *Bild* newspaper and the Springer Media Group have promoted his films and supported him in his new alliance with the Bundeswehr by publishing his “Afghanistan-diary” in which Schweiger describes his impressions “exclusively for *Bild*”.

The soldiers Schweiger glorifies in his diary, however, are far removed from the “heroes” he portrays on screen. They are the victims of a government policy that, under a phony “humanitarian”

pretext, sends them into a war driven by economic and political interests and in which they are used as tools for the suppression of the Afghan population.

This contradiction between the objective role of German soldiers at war and their subjective attitude towards it could be the basis for a realistic and timely film about the Bundeswehr mission in Afghanistan. However, Schweiger has not the least interest in such an approach. He prefers to idealize a military that sends young people to the killing fields of Afghanistan and is consciously preparing to intervene against resistance by the German working population to the attacks on its living conditions.



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