

The German mini-series *Generation War*: Five young people traumatized by World War II

Bernd Reinhardt
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Directed by Philipp Kadelbach, written by Stefan Kolditz

The World War II television mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (*Our mothers, our fathers*) reached a record audience in Germany when it was broadcast in March of this year. Each of the three episodes was watched by an estimated seven million people, or some 10 percent of the adult population. The mini-series generated an almost unprecedented public discussion in Germany. *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* has now been distributed to the US and other countries under the name *Generation War*. The program was recently aired on Polish television as well.

We begin in Berlin, 1941: Five young people, just out of school, are hurled into the atrocities of the Second World War. Somewhat naively, they believe they will soon meet again. But four years must pass before they do. Those who survived are heavily scarred by the hell they have gone through.

The main characters include the brothers Wilhelm (Volker Bruch) and Friedhelm Winter (Tom Schilling), who come from a good home where they maintain Prussian military values. Viktor Goldstein (Ludwig Trepte) is the son of a Jewish tailor who proudly fought for Germany in the First World War and who considers the Star of David to be a “mistake”. Viktor is the partner of Greta (Katharina Schüttler) who admires the film star Marlene Dietrich and dreams of her own singing career while rinsing glasses in a pub. For Greta, the Third Reich does not really matter. Charlotte (Miriam Stein), however, is proud to serve Germany and volunteers as a nurse on the Eastern Front.

The stories are told concurrently, so that a kind of cinematic mosaic is created. The personal experiences of former war veterans also flow into the film. The rapid and direct focus of director Philipp Kadelbach is influenced by American cinema, without falling into the Hollywood tendency to stage one bloody orgy of violence after another. The trilogy is clearly an anti-war work, which—in a realistic and nuanced way—shows the overwhelming consequences of the war for young people at the time and how it changed their lives and thinking.

At the beginning of the mini-series we are not introduced to the type of fanatical youth portrayed in Nazi propaganda movies (and in many other films and media presentations).

The young people have a much more casual attitude toward the slogans and watchwords of the Hitler regime. “Shalom,

fellow countrymen”, Viktor greets his friends ironically. The well-read Friedhelm counters the officially promoted ideals of the “German heroes” with ridicule. Charlotte is influenced by the nationalist education taught in the Nazis’ BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädel—League of German Girls), but that does not affect her friendship with Viktor and Greta, who according to the precepts of the Nazis were guilty of “racial defilement.”

Prior to the start of the war, Friedhelm predicts it will bring out the worst in people. The three episodes of *Generation War* confirm this in part. The friends are involved in crimes that nobody would have committed under normal conditions. But Friedhelm’s fatalistic words are also refuted.

For example, Wilhelm unsuccessfully attempts to prevent a Jewish girl from being shot by the SS. Such efforts occurred. And the so-called “Commissar Order”—Hitler’s instruction that any Soviet officials captured during the invasion of the USSR be immediately executed—is not carried out by Wilhelm with blind obedience, let alone enthusiastically. The reality of war continues to feed his doubts. He is shocked by the inhumanity of senior army officers towards the ordinary soldiers who are sent into the slaughter with complete indifference.

Wilhelm loses almost all his men in a senseless battle for a telegraph station. He deserts and ends up in a penal unit. Shortly before the end of the war, he does something unheard of for the type of exemplary soldier he once was.

Friedhelm is an interesting figure. From the outset, he considers the war against “International Jewry” to be senseless. But he is precisely the individual who, after a certain time, is the one able to carry out the cruellest of orders without flinching: shooting a young woman, taking part in an execution of alleged partisans. Despite his ironic distance, his ridiculing of “blond heroes”, his provocative statements, Friedhelm’s entire elitist posturing has nothing to do with a principled opposition to the war. He is passive and cynical.

When he can no longer shirk “voluntary deployments”, he throws himself into the fight with this same cynicism, and becomes a very conscious and dangerous soldier. Finally, completely burned out inside, he runs alone into the machine gun fire of the Red Army to prevent the child soldiers of his armed “Volkssturm” militia (“Peoples Storm”) from a senseless fight. From the Soviet point of view, he must have

seemed like a fanatic seeking a hero's death shortly before the war ended. How many such desperate "fanatics" were there?

Charlotte's development shows that irrational ideologies may collapse when they collide with reality. The nurse is initially bewildered by the unheroic nature of daily life, including the moaning wounded and the doctors' rapid decisions about life and death.

When Charlotte seeks out an assistant among the Ukrainian "Untermenschen" ("sub-humans"), she soon notices that this woman is technically superior to her and begins to admire her. When Charlotte learns she is Jewish, she reports her, only to regret it a moment later. The decision to try and rescue the other woman comes too late. Later, she tries in vain to make up for her failure with a Russian auxiliary nurse. Nothing is left of Charlotte's initial conviction that she is a member of a Master Race.

In the end, the survivors are ready for a fresh start. But when Viktor comes to Berlin, still shocked by the anti-Semitism of the Polish anti-fascists, he happens on an administration facility run by former SS commander Dorn (Mark Waschke), who had worked for the Gestapo and was responsible for Victor's deportation and other crimes. The special expertise of this nimble Nazi careerist is called upon again—this time by the Allies. This scene, referencing a common postwar reality, is one of the most convincing in *Generation War*.

Producer Nico Hofmann has produced a number of movies treating major social experiences. The two-part television program *Dresden* (2006) dealt with the suffering of the civilian population in the brutal Allied bombing of that German city in February 1945, which killed some 25,000 people. *The Fugitive* (2007) focused on the human suffering arising from the expulsion of the German population in 1945 from what was then East Prussia. These events left deep historical scars.

On the basis of the widespread thesis of collective "German guilt" after the war little was said about these events, or rather, they were the exclusive domain of right-wing political forces. For the 1968 generation of protesters, German civilians in the war belonged to the "perpetrator generation" who had to answer for the Holocaust.

To its credit, the *Generation War* trilogy distinguishes itself from American author Daniel Goldhagen's reactionary assertion that all "ordinary Germans" were "Hitler's willing executioners."

Hofmann's stated intention was to depict the "personal stories", the nightmares of a generation who were children when Hitler came to power, experienced terrible things in the war and were condemned to silence later. He has succeeded impressively. *Generation War* is the most convincing of his films so far.

The biggest weakness of the trilogy is its socially vague selection of the youth going to war. Broader social and political influences are largely omitted. At the beginning of the first part, the main characters are implausibly naïve and untouched by

what is taking place around them. The filmmakers explain away this failure to take the ruling fascist ideology and the war very seriously with the flippant explanation "That's just how young people are". That's much too simple.

In so far as social backgrounds play a role (Greta's and Charlotte's origins remain very cloudy), the characters have been selected one-sidedly. The three other central figures come from bourgeois-nationalist conservative homes, which as a rule proudly sent their children off to war. The film does not provide a group genuinely representative of German society at the time.

What was the reaction of millions of parents, who, unlike Victor's father, returned home not full of pride but rather profoundly shocked (and radicalized) by the First World War? These parents then experienced a second shock when Germany began massively rearming under the Weimar Republic for a new war. The political and social divisions of the Weimar period were formative for them all. Millions voted for the Social Democrats and the Communist Party. The tense social atmosphere and divisions reached a new high point under the Nazis, whose dictatorship was far removed from a "people's state". These conflicts and tensions are barely reflected in the main figures and their stories in *Generation War*.

Where social influences remain invisible, actions often seem enigmatic, or rather, individual character traits, both strengths and weaknesses, are overemphasized. Several of the young actors involved admitted they had had difficulty understanding the motives of their characters. The actor playing Viktor conceded that he just played along.

The mini-series also features surviving war veterans. This speaks to the realistic depiction of the events. However, *Generation War* is unable to make any relevant link to the present other than raising the thoroughly general question often repeated in talk shows: How would you have behaved at that time? The responses to this question, as can be imagined, do little to illuminate the causes and enduring significance of World War II.



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