

German television series *Tannbach* and German postwar history

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The three-part series *Tannbach—Fate of a Village* broadcast by ZDF [German public-service television], which achieved high ratings in January, attempted to follow on from the great success of the trilogy *Generation War* (2013). The latter dealt with the impact on five young Germans of the crimes of the Nazi regime. *Tannbach* attempts to encompass the history of divided Germany in the years following the Second World War by dramatising the fate of the inhabitants of a small village on the border between the two Germanys.

ZDF broadcasting director Norbert Himmler asserts that the television series “tells how it all began: from our roots in the postwar Germany of both republics, the German Democratic Republic [former Stalinist East Germany, GDR] and the Federal Republic of Germany [former capitalist West Germany, FRG]”. This claim, however, is misleading. Despite some excellent performances, the series is loaded with clichés and prejudices, which it often promotes in quite an embarrassing way.

With respect to both the “West Germans’ view of East Germany” and “East Germans’ formulaic attitudes and prejudices”, screenwriters Josephin and Robert Thayenthal fail to critically examine issues in any depth. Despite the supposedly “objective picture” of the times, the view upheld in official propaganda since the demise of the GDR predominates: that in eastern Germany one kind of totalitarian dictatorship [Nazism] was replaced by another [Stalinism], which was no less brutal and cruel than the first. The screenwriters themselves speak of the “two great German dictatorships of the twentieth century”.

This equation of two completely different regimes—on the one hand, the Hitler dictatorship, which destroyed the labour movement in the interests of German business, unleashed the Second World War and murdered millions of Jews, Gypsies, Roma, disabled persons and prisoners of war; and, on the other, the Stalinist dictatorship, which nationalised large estates and industries, but suppressed workers’ democracy in order to secure the rule of a privileged bureaucracy—precludes the possibility of any realistic and credible representation of the period. *Tannbach* tends to present viewers with stock figures rather than human characters.

The US forces, who initially occupy the village at the end of the war, are generous, benevolent and “cool”. The Soviets, who later take over from the Americans, descend on the defenceless villagers like barbarian hordes. At the end of Part 1, the first appearance of the Soviet military concludes with their shooting of an innocent old man, a mother and a child, simply because a portrait of Hitler is found in a drawer. This pattern of presentation runs through the whole film.

Trying to balance this one-sided view by including two “good” communists fails to make things better. Both of them—Konrad Werner (Ronald Zehrfeld), who has returned from exile in the USSR, and Friedrich Erler (Jonas Nay), the son of a Communist murdered by the Nazis—appear naive and implausible in their idealistic belief in a better future.

The film’s scriptwriters are so unaware of their own prejudices that they even reproduce the kind of bigotry characteristic of the Nazi era. Of the

two young friends who flee to Tannbach from the rubble of Berlin, Friedrich Erler (non-Jew) becomes a farmer, while Lothar Erler (a Jew) ends up a smuggler. The writers should be ashamed of themselves.

“The Morning After the War”

Tannbach is a fictional village on the Thuringian-Bavarian border. It is based on the actual village of Mödlareuth in Upper Franconia-Thuringia, which was split between the US and Soviet occupation zones in 1945. The stream running through that small village is the Tannbach. The three-part series was actually filmed in Besno in the Czech Republic. Considerable effort was put into the attempt to make details of scenery, costumes and props as historically accurate as possible.

Part 1, “The Morning After the War”, begins in the last days of World War II. Just before US troops break into the estate of Count Georg von Striesow (Heiner Lauterbach), a young SS officer (David Zimmerschied) has the Countess (Natalie Wörner) shot because she refuses to betray her husband who has returned from the war as a deserter.

The count was denounced by Franz Schober (Alexander Held), a prosperous farmer and fanatical Nazi, who immediately offers to serve the Americans with his meticulously recorded insider knowledge of Nazi members and their activities. The SS officer, Schober’s illegitimate son, is exposed to the Americans by his own mother, Hilde (Martina Gedeck).

In any event, the US occupation is brief. Thuringia is assigned to the Soviet occupation zone, while Bavaria remains under American control. Soviet troops take over the village. Following a later revision of demarcation lines, US troops return to the western side of the village, which is divided down the middle.

The Soviet soldiers are portrayed as violent thugs, taking revenge for the atrocities of the German military through rape and plunder. What the German troops have done in the east is not revealed until the third part of the trilogy. Schober’s firstborn son, returning late from the war, shouts into the count’s face that he himself had ordered massacres before deserting his command. In retaliation for the killing of German soldiers, entire village populations—men, women and children—were shot as partisans.

One of the most powerful scenes in the first part includes the screening of a film recording the Americans troops’ liberation of Buchenwald concentration camp, which the Tannbach villagers are made to watch.

Further plot developments focus on the count’s daughter, Anna (Henriette Confusius), and Friedrich Erler, the working class youth from Berlin. The young couple fall in love, hoping to find fulfilment in a new and better world, where there are “no top and no bottom classes, and no more war”. Friedrich’s mother, Liesbeth Erler (Nadja Uhl), wants to escape the bad times, go to America and take her family with her.

Meanwhile the countess's parents, former brewery owners from Zwickau and still fervent Nazis, have prepared their escape to Argentina via the "rat line" organised by Nazi operatives in collaboration with the Vatican, and want to take their granddaughter Anna with them, but she refuses.

"The Expropriation"

Part 2, "The expropriation", deals with land reform in the Soviet occupation zone. Landowners who possess more than 100 hectares [247 acres] of property, or who were members of the Nazi party and committed war crimes, are expropriated without compensation. The land is then divided into five-hectare [12-acre] portions and allotted to the so-called "new farmers".

The film fails to explain the brutal and reactionary role played by the *Junker* class (Prussian nobility) during the Wilhelmine Empire (1871-1918), the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) and the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933. Instead, Count von Striesow (convincingly played by Lauterbach) is presented as not such a bad fellow, although he reacts to the expropriation of his estate as the worst injustice imaginable.

After returning from POW incarceration in France, he refuses to accept that his daughter Anna has married Friedrich and is working with him to cultivate five hectares of land allocated to them from the Striesow family's former estate.

"My Land, Your Land"

In Part 3, "My Land, Your Land", Anna and Friedrich are living on their small farm, which is barely capable of supporting them and their child. Lothar contributes significantly to the family's subsistence through his cross-border smuggling and as a black marketeer.

Four years later, in 1952 and during the Cold War, the East German Stalinists build a fence running across the whole of Germany. It goes through the middle of Tannbach, which lies within the five-kilometre protected area behind the fence. The entire population of the eastern part of the village is subjected to stringent security regulations.

At this point, Liesbeth visits Tannbach from America, enthusiastically praising New York, where everyone can say what he or she wants and it "doesn't matter whether anyone is a Jew or a Catholic". She denies that anyone wants a new war: "You've all just talked yourselves into believing that."

No one watching *Tannbach* would know that the US had just initiated a bloody war against North Korea and China that claimed three-four million lives, that the American ruling elite was engaged in the ferocious, anti-democratic McCarthyite witch-hunts and that African Americans were subject to brutal apartheid conditions in the US South.

A young East German border guard in Tannbach is shot and killed by West German border guards, leading to a tightening of border security. All people suspected of not being one hundred percent loyal to the Stalinist regime are forced to relocate away from the immediate border area or face prison if they oppose the evacuation order.

District administration head Konrad Werner, an idealistic communist, initially protects the Erlers when they are targeted for arrest by the increasingly powerful state security forces because of Lothar's smuggling activities. Lothar is shot by East German border guards as he attempts to illegally cross the demarcation area to attend the baptism of Anna and

Friedrich's child, which Anna had requested be held at the village church in Tannbach's western half.

After the baptism, Liesbeth remains in West Germany. The family is finally separated. District commissar Werner is removed to Berlin. He says goodbye to Friedrich with the words: "Working for a fairer world is not a bad idea, but unfortunately there'll be setbacks along the way. New world orders take time to bring into existence." Anna receives her downcast husband, Friedrich, with the words: "I'm proud of you. I believe in this here. I believe in everything we've built up here. This is our home".

This open but scarcely credible conclusion is apparently designed to allow the filmmakers to claim they have presented the problems and perspectives of East and West Germans objectively.

Screenwriters Josephin and Robert Thayenthal write in response to the many questions raised by the period treated in the film, as follows: "Television won't be able to give the answers, but perhaps it will give a sense of how people feel, think and act, how they develop and harden, how they behave under the threat of overwhelming power and in the grip of extreme fear".

This statement points to the dilemma, faced by television productions, which claim simultaneously to entertain and educate. Communication of vague "feelings" is not enough for the understanding of history. Different viewpoints and experiences are juxtaposed, but they cannot be comprehended in any profound way because the socio-historical context has not been presented.

What *Tannbach* entirely leaves out, among other things, is the role of the parties responsible for the defeat of the German working class and the catastrophe of fascism, the Social Democrats and, above all, the Communist Party, which due to Stalin's catastrophic policies, facilitated Hitler's rise to power. Apart from coming to terms with the failure of the social revolution in Germany due to the crisis of working class leadership, no significant chapter of mid- and late-20th century German history can be profoundly understood.

Due to certain outstanding performances, the production offers numerous impressive scenes, but ultimately *Tannbach* is unsatisfactory. Compared to Edgar Reitz's epic series *Heimat: A Chronicle of Germany* (1984), for example, the portrayal of the characters and their involvement in various events is often quite flat and unconvincing. But this is more the fault of the weak and limited script, and not so much that of the director, Alexander Dierbach, or the performers.

The documentary *Spring 1945*, broadcast by *Arte* on January 13, is far more successful in conveying an accurate picture of the immediate postwar period. The three episodes of *Tannbach* and related documentation are currently available in the *ZDF* media library.



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