

New study throws light on Nazi past of Berlin film festival's founder

Stefan Steinberg
8 October 2020

The annual Berlin International Film Festival (generally known as the Berlinale) was founded in 1951 amidst the ruins of Germany's capital city following the Second World War. In the ensuing decades the event became—and now remains—one of the world's leading showcases for global cinema.

A newly published study reveals that the individual who proposed setting up the festival and headed it for a quarter century in the postwar period played a leading role in the Nazi film industry.

Alfred Bauer (1911-1986) was the first director of the Berlin film festival, remaining in the position from 1951 to 1976. One of the principal prizes awarded at the festival, from 1987 to 2020, bore his name. The Alfred Bauer Prize was bestowed each year to a film that “opens new perspectives on cinematic art.” The directors whose works won the award include Zhang Yimou, Tsai Ming-Liang, Andrzej Wajda, Alain Resnais and Agnieszka Holland.

An article in the weekly *Die Zeit* in early 2020 revealed that, contrary to his own account and authorised histories of the Berlinale, Bauer was neither a low-level employee nor a semi-opponent of the Hitler regime, but rather the deputy head of the Reich Film Directorate (*Reichsfilmintendanz*) and a right-hand man of the infamous Propaganda and Culture Minister Joseph Goebbels.

The latest research by historian Dr. Tobias Hof, on behalf of the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, charts Bauer's political history based on a study of archives in both Germany and the US.

Bauer joined the National Socialist German Student Union (NSDStB), a division of the Nazi Party, and became a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA, “Storm Detachment”)—the Nazis' paramilitary wing—just months after Hitler's accession to power in 1933. In 1937 he applied for membership in the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and was accepted. As the English-language summary of Hof's work notes, Bauer “received his [Nazi Party] membership card with the number 4401355 on November 15, 1937. His date of entry was as stipulated in Order 18/37 (April 20, 1937) dated back to May 1, 1937.”

At the outbreak of the war, Bauer was drafted into an anti-aircraft unit, but was relieved of military duties in 1942 due to health problems. In the same year, he took up a leading position

in the *Reichsfilmintendanz*, a key institution for managing German film production under the Nazi regime. The directorate controlled, planned and monitored the distribution, censorship and production of German and European films during the Hitler regime's “total war.”

In his leading position, Bauer was responsible for the deployment of forced labourers for use in film production. To this end, a camp was established on the site of the German Film Academy Babelsberg in Potsdam (near Berlin) to house around 600 inmates, including women and children.

Dr. Hof concludes: “If one realises the importance of the *Reichsfilmintendanz* within the Nazi film system, it can be stated from the sources examined that Bauer made a not insignificant contribution to the functioning of the German film system within the Nazi dictatorship and thus to the stabilisation and legitimisation of Nazi rule.”

Hof's report also explains how Bauer covered up his links to the Hitler regime in the course of the interrogations during his postwar “denazification” process. Bauer was one of many leading Nazis who covered his tracks with a combination of false statements and half-truths aimed at establishing he was an active opponent of the Nazis.

Bauer claimed he was the “only anti-fascist consciously swimming against the current in leading film circles at the time.” But, as Hof notes: “Even if his argumentation and defence strategies show numerous similarities to comparable cases, the audacity and obstrusiveness of his approach stand out. They reveal Bauer's ambitious, almost unscrupulous opportunism, which may also have influenced his closeness to the Nazi regime.”

After completing his official denazification, Bauer was able seamlessly to resume his career in the German film industry. In 1950, he sent a memo to the mayor of West Berlin, Ernst Reuter, a leading Social Democrat (SPD) and former member of the Communist Party, proposing the creation of a film institute in Berlin and a yearly film festival. During the Cold War, the German government was eager to appease its US ally and the Berlinale was founded as a showcase for “Western values” in opposition to the “dictatorial, Communist” East.

Dieter Kosslick, the festival's director from 2001 to 2019 and a former press spokesman for Hans-Ulrich Klose, the SPD

mayor of Hamburg, was one of those who made no effort to investigate the credentials of his prominent predecessor.

Following Bauer's exposure in January, the new festival leadership agreed to cancel the Alfred Bauer Prize and announced that a new prize would be awarded at the next Berlinale. In addition, the new management commissioned an investigation into Bauer's Nazi past.

Rainer Rother, artistic director of the Deutsche Kinemathek and director of the Berlin film festival Retrospective since 2006, declared that the case of Bauer confirmed that a "zero hour," i.e., a postwar clean slate regarding the activities of leading Nazis, was a fiction.

The new co-director of the festival, Mariette Rissenbeck, declared at a press release that the new findings were "startling," and acknowledged there were "still numerous research gaps in the historical analysis of the postwar film industry."

Bauer was not the only prominent German film personality to cover up his or her connections to the Nazi regime. In his book *Das Braune Netz* (2019, translated as *Nazi Networks*), author Willi Winkler throws light on the background to Germany's first postwar film *Murderers Among Us* (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*, 1946), traditionally regarded as an attempt to come to grips with Germany's responsibility for the war.

The film was directed by Wolfgang Staudte, who had himself been a member of the Nazi Party and even played a minor role as an actor in the viciously anti-Semitic film, *Jud Süß* (*Süss the Jew*, directed by Veit Harlan, 1940). Staudte's cameraman, Friedl Behn-Grund, was also active in the Nazi film industry and stood behind the camera for the film, *I Accuse* (*Ich klage an*, 1941), which promoted the Nazi's euthanasia campaign and the extermination of those the regime denoted as "unfit to live."

The main figure in *Murderers Among Us* is a young woman and concentration camp survivor. The role was played by Hildegard Knef, who became one of the best known and most highly regarded actresses in postwar Germany. After the war, Knef also doctored her own biography, denying her relationship with Ewald von Demandowsky, a playwright who first joined the Nazis in 1931 and was a protégé of Goebbels. It was Demandowsky who secured Knef's first roles in German films towards the end of the war.

Winkler also cites the example of the television detective series *Derrick*, one of the most popular programs on postwar German television, which was broadcast in 100 other countries. From 1974 to 1998, actor Horst Tappert portrayed Stephan Derrick as a thoroughly honest, upright and somewhat pedantic Munich police detective who always gets his man. Living the life of a monk and, as Winkler notes, incapable of hurting a fly, Derrick was the complete antithesis of a ruthless Nazi.

In fact, the main author of the *Derrick* stories, Herbert Reinecker, joined the Hitler Youth movement in 1932 at the age of 17. From April 1935 onward, Reinecker worked full-

time as a propagandist for the Nazi youth movement.

He continued his propaganda work for the fascists during World War II as a war correspondent attached to Hitler's homicidal Waffen-SS during the German invasion of the Soviet Union. He authored articles for the SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* until the end of the war.

Fifteen years after the end of the *Derrick* series on German television, it became known that Tappert himself had also kept secret his involvement with the Hitler regime. The future television actor had claimed he had merely built roads in the USSR during the war and trained as a paramedic. In fact, after being mustered into the army at the start of World War II, Tappert spent most of its duration as a soldier in the Waffen-SS serving with the SS Panzer Division Totenkopf in the Soviet Union. In 1943 Tappert was promoted to the rank of SS grenadier.

Winkler notes that Tappert launched his television career as *Derrick* at the same time as the Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt (who was also an officer in the German military) took up the office of chancellor in 1974. The *Derrick* character finally hung up his hat in 1998 when nearly a quarter century of Social Democratic rule came to an end.

The case of Bauer and others makes clear that it was not only leading politicians, academics and jurists who actively embraced the poisonous ideology of Nazism and then played leading roles in postwar Germany. Many artists and cultural figures responsible for propagating fascist ideology during the war took the same path.

In the conclusion of his report, as well as in an interview with German radio, Tobias Hof stressed the need for much more research into "the person of Alfred Bauer and the German film industry of the 1940s and 1950s."

This is not an academic question. Today the far-right, racist Alternative for Germany (AfD) constitutes the main opposition party in Germany. The party's culture spokesman, Marc Jongen, openly uses the German parliament as a platform to echo filthy fascist propaganda and denounce migrants who threaten "Germany's disappearance as a nation."

The thorough clarification of the role of Germany's political and artistic elite under fascism and after the war remains an urgent task.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact