

Stage version of Robert Harris' *Vaterland* [*Fatherland*] in Dresden—a highly topical, but ambivalently directed play

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Vaterland, a stage version of the 1992 novel *Fatherland* by British author Robert Harris, was performed at the Dresden State Theatre from February 2023 until May 22. Directed by Claudia Bauer, a rousing and highly topical play unfortunately goes adrift in a sea of unnecessary frivolity and gimmickry.

Harris' 1992 novel transports the reader into a dystopian parallel world that combines the historical with the fictional. The year is 1964, and US president Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. is about to meet Europe's leading head of state. The latter, however, is not the French president, British prime minister or head of a budding European Union, but rather the Führer and Chancellor of the Reich, Adolf Hitler.

According to the novel, Nazi Germany won the Second World War, at least in Europe. The Third Reich extended itself as far as the Urals and for decades has been waging a deadlocked war of attrition against the remnants of the Soviet Union. The US, on the other hand, defeated Japan, but withdrew from Europe after the capitulation of Great Britain and is now waging a Cold War against the so-called "Greater German Reich."

On the Führer's 75th birthday, this Cold War is now to end and an agreement is to be reached with President Joseph Kennedy in order to normalise relations.

At the centre of the plot is the Nazi SS officer and Berlin detective superintendent Xaver März. The former submarine captain and divorced father of a son is portrayed as a thoughtful loner. As a conscientious investigator, he has to deal with a death that is to be filed as a suicide at the personal insistence of Gestapo chief Odilo "Globus" Globocnik.

The supposed suicide of retired state secretary Josef Bühler "quickly turns out to be a crime with political implications. Together with the American journalist Charlotte Maguire, März's investigations uncover a crime of barely imaginable proportions that has so far been covered up in this fictitious version of history," explains the Dresden theatre, summarising the core of the narrative. This great crime, of course, is the Holocaust.

Published in 1992, the novel quickly became an international bestseller. In the German newspapers, however, it was savaged. A glance at the cover of the novel's first edition reveals why.

Harris was writing against the background of the reunification of East and West Germany, and amidst warnings of a resurgence of Germany as a superpower.

"He insinuates that Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl has completed the economic domination of Europe sought by the Nazis," Karl-Heinz Janssen wrote in the weekly *Die Zeit* at the time, summarising what

the German media resented about Harris' novel. After reunification and Kohl's "intellectual and moral turnaround," this "Brit" dared to spit in the new Greater German soup by showing how German elites covered up the Holocaust and how US foreign policy was not particularly bothered by the fact. But "at least no German publisher has stooped to such frivolous tastelessness," Janssen wrote gloatingly.

In fact, *Fatherland* was initially only published in German in Switzerland, and not until 1994 by the German publisher Heyne Verlag. Developments since reunification and the current situation show that the fears at that time were far from fictional or "frivolous tastelessness." In fact, the 1990s foreshadowed the rise of German imperialism to become the leading power in Europe. The eastward expansion of German capitalism and NATO, today's military build-up and threats against Russia herald the return of war and dictatorship.

Bauer's theatre production of *Vaterland* counters attempts to cover up and trivialise the Nazi past. After a brief introduction about the world-historical situation, the audience finds itself accompanying a group of tourists. Berlin has now been transformed into the "World Capital of Germania," according to Hitler's fantasies, and it is not the television tower in East Berlin that towers over the city, but rather the 320-metre [1050-feet] tall "Hall of Fame."

Everyone in the group wears different, brightly coloured but identical jogging suits and face masks with blonde wigs. A successful parody of the ridiculous ideal of beauty of the "Aryan race" and a society in uniform.

Also in the group is Xaver März, played by Nadja Stübiger, and his son Paul, played by Kaya Loewe. In dialogue, we get an impression of the tense family relationship between the indoctrinated son and the cynical, if not bored, father faced with some inconsistencies in the official patter of the city guide. The guide, played by Ahmad Mesgarha, introduces himself as "Dirk from the neighbourhood." With a Berlin dialect along with a piggy snout and some grotesquely ridiculous scraps of "guide wisdom," he or she guides us through the capital city, routinely rattling off facts and figures about the city's architecture.

This scene would constitute a successful portrayal of the absurd reality in "Germania," but Bauer and her players allow the absurdity to slide into shallowness. Mesgarha parodies his role in a short skirt as a mixture of city guide and stewardess with exaggeratedly expansive gestures, slapstick interludes, singing and multiple puns.

This opening scene is symptomatic of a core problem of the whole performance. Instead of illustrating the grotesque conditions in the Nazi dystopia with doses of selective exaggeration, the play descends

into sheer frivolity. As a result, the audience is repeatedly torn away from the threatening and repulsive atmosphere of “Greater Germany” and the play’s dramatic plot.

Typical in this regard are the scenes in which März and his detective colleague Jäger fool around with a box of chocolates; journalist Maguire beats up four Gestapo henchmen with a baseball bat, accompanied by cartoon music; März and Maguire dance around the stage like ballerinas in pink and white petticoats during a dialogue about the background to the death they are investigating.

The various supporting roles played by Mesgarha in particular stand out in a negative way. After the interval, this “Nazi comedy,” as an editor from Deutschlandfunk put it, suddenly turns “expressive,” with “rolling eyes, loud shouting and an unnecessarily bloody torture scene.”

It is mainly thanks to the strong performances of the actors, above all Stübiger, but also the impressive stage design, that the audience is repeatedly brought back to the actual, threatening, oppressive and gloomy atmosphere.

The stage is essentially filled by a monolithic, dark wooden block. With doors and windows, this serves sometimes as a backdrop, but predominantly as a “black hole which März is repeatedly sucked into” and has to decide: “Do I go in there?” Or as Bauer says in an interview: “The rotten centre of the universe in which we move in *Vaterland* is, of course, the concealed Holocaust.”

The viewer is taken into this “rotten centre” by a hand-held camera that shows live on a screen what is happening inside. This camera is also successfully used at other moments to emphasise the scenery or to give the actors’ acting more space.

One of the highlights is undoubtedly the moment when, after a long search, März and Maguire hold the documents proving the Holocaust in their hands. In the dystopia of the original novel, over ten million people fell victim and the traces, including all the extermination camps, have already been removed. The last participant in the Wannsee Conference, the former Undersecretary of State Martin Luther, and thus a key witness to the “Final Solution,” has also been shot in front of the two characters’ eyes. With the documents he handed over to them, they now hold a Pandora’s box in their hands.

März and Maguire take turns reading the documents aloud, while the camera projects their faces onto the screen. As their words have been pre-recorded, their silent looks of horror are in sharp focus. While Maguire’s inner voice reads out the documents on the Final Solution, written in sober bureaucratic German, März alternates by reading eyewitness accounts. From selection on the railway ramp to the hammering on the doors of the gas chambers, the audience is taken on an incredibly impressive journey into the depths of horror in just one brief scene.

Shortly afterwards, all of this is cancelled out again. Maguire recites a series of thoughts about truth, and how to recognise it, at breakneck speed.

In an interview with the theatre’s dramaturge Lüder Wilcke, the director answers the question of “how one can talk about the unimaginable” by referencing the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, a particularly cynical representative of postmodernist trends and occasional Stalin supporter. In his pamphlet “Description without a Place,” he wrote that one can only talk about the Holocaust in an indirect, lyrical form. Žižek writes that “when truth is too traumatic to be confronted directly, it can only be accepted in the guise of a fiction. A direct documentary about the Holocaust would be obscene, even disrespectful towards the victims.”

The play is about propaganda, according to the director, about “how a state presents itself,” and therefore also “about the general principles of totalitarian regimes.” This is present in every scene, “truth and propaganda. Or untruth and propaganda.”

The postmodern view that there is no cognisable, objective historical truth and that many truths exist side by side on an equal footing, ultimately including those of fascists, has increasingly poisoned the cultural climate since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Many former left-wing intellectuals have become right-wing, pro-NATO and pro-war. This includes Žižek, who, since the start of the war in Ukraine, has been an ardent supporter of arms supplies, including nuclear bombs, for the right-wing Zelensky regime, while equating Russia with Hitler’s Germany.

Bauer does not go so far, as she emphasises in the interview. Under no circumstances does she want to draw “parallels between Russia and this Greater German Reich,” she says in response to a question about the war in Ukraine. Harris’ novel *Fatherland* plays out what would have happened if Hitler had won the war. Dictatorship means “surveillance, marginalisation, cover-up, in the worst case, genocide. We have to remember that,” she adds. Even if the portrayal of the Holocaust in the theatre is an “extremely delicate issue,” it is worth introducing younger generations to the topic with a “tension-filled story.”

The fact that Bauer does not join the chorus of postmodern war supporters is to be welcomed. However, her orientation towards Žižek and the philosophy of “many truths” means that she evades a fundamental fact: the capitalist system that gave rise to fascism in the 1930s still exists and is once again driving war, dictatorship and genocide today. Postmodernism denies this inner connection.

This also underlies the ambivalent staging of *Vaterland*, its irritating juxtaposition of disturbing scenes about the Holocaust with superficial comic playfulness.

The director admits that this was also a matter of concern for the cast. The actors raised such questions as “Can this evening also be funny? To what extent can you approach it with a *Sin City* aesthetic, for example? Isn’t that in bad taste?”

The final performance of the play last week ended—like the performances before it—in front of a full house and with a standing ovation for the ensemble. Its great success is not primarily due to the various comic interludes, but rather the topicality and explosive nature of the drama for today.



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