

Germans as Victims, Collective Guilt and Responsibility

L. M. Stallbaumer-Beishline  
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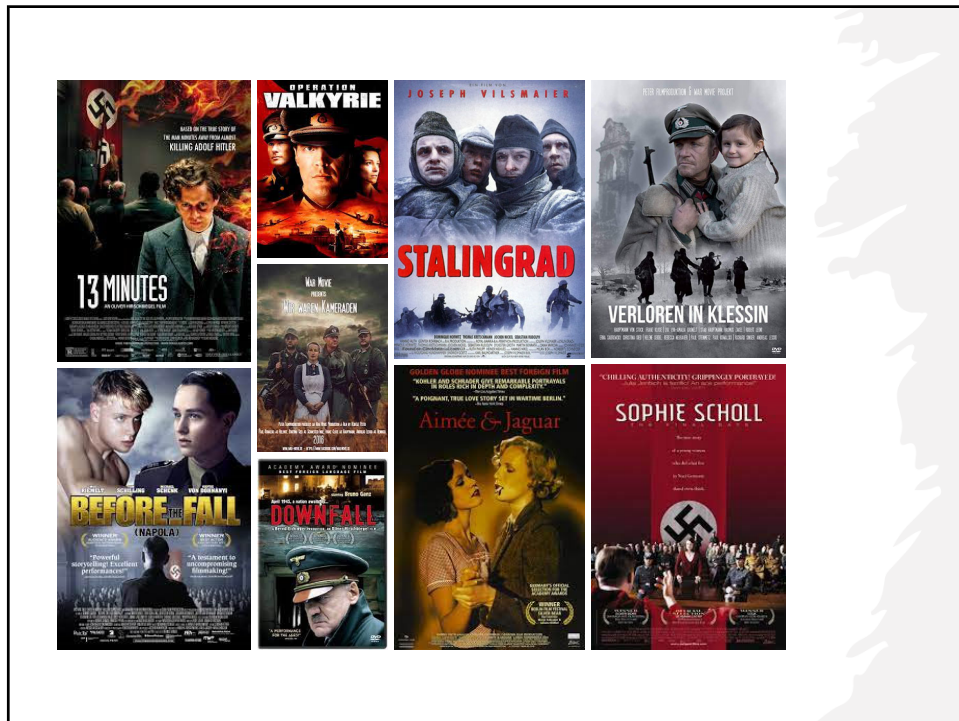
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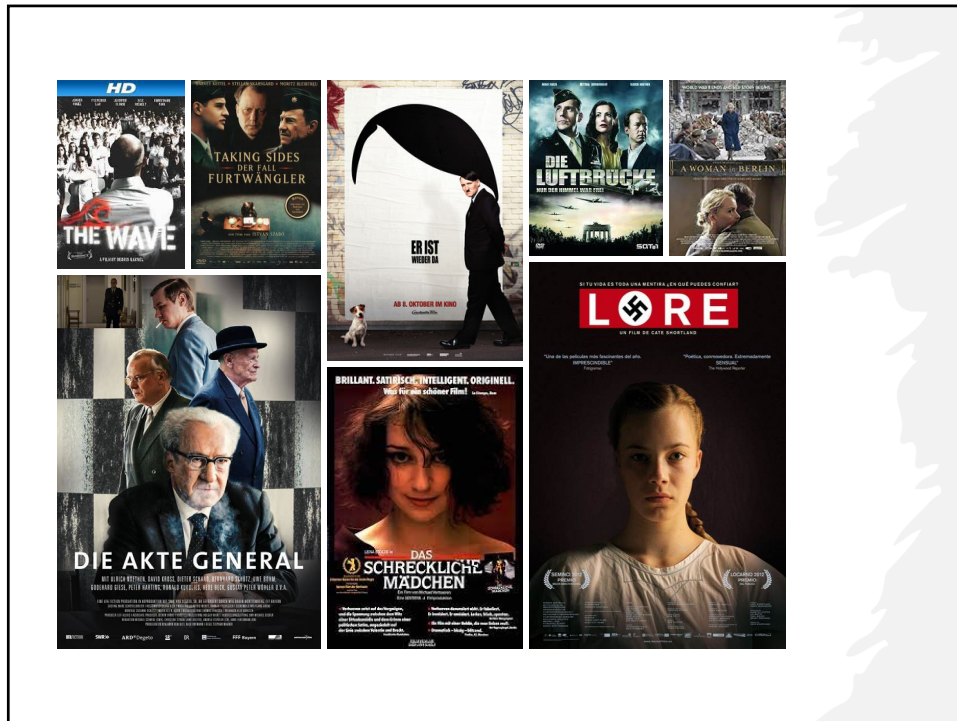
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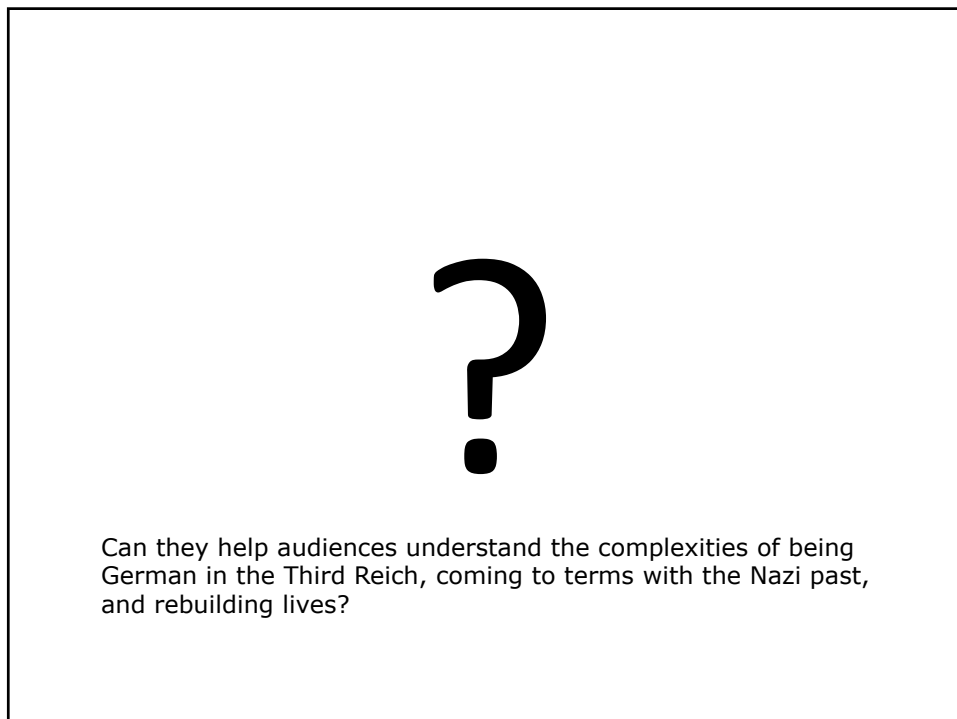
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Can they help audiences understand the complexities of being German in the Third Reich, coming to terms with the Nazi past, and rebuilding lives?

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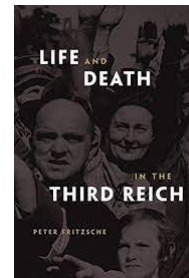
Larger Context of the Third Reich

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## Hitler and “Ordinary Germans”

“As a vast project for social, political, and racial renewal, National Socialism offered the German people a range of ways in which to participate. Germans approached Nazi policies out of fear, opportunism, and careerism, as well as varying degrees of ideological conviction. The list can be extended: citizens were also lazy, indifferent, and ignorant. These various motivations need to stay in view. However, National Socialism exerted strong pressure on citizens to convert, to see the credibility of the people’s community, and to recognize one another as ‘racial comrades.’”

~Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, 2008, 8.



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## “Contested Memories”

“In trying to explain the Nazi catastrophe to later readers, ordinary memoirists tended to resort to several standard excuses. Martin Sieg argued, ‘we did not choose the time in which we were born’ and ‘were generally only reacting’ to overwhelming outside forces. Will Seelmann-Eggebert claimed ‘the that majority of Germans did not know anything of the criminal murder of many million human beings.’ Youthful ex-soldiers like Gerhardt Thamm blamed ‘the guilty, the Nazi party bosses, the executioners, concentrate camp managers’ for their misfortune and justified fighting against the Red Army by trying to ‘delay, to save, to stave off annihilation.’ Some unregenerate nationalists such as Karl Härtel instead held the Allies responsible: ‘We were not perpetrators but victims of a pogrom against the German people and Reich, initiated by our opponents with the dictated [peace] of Versailles.’ Accusing history in general, the Nazi leadership in particular, or even their wartime enemies absolved individuals from taking personal responsibility. Instead, they could claim, ‘We were cheated out of our youth.’”

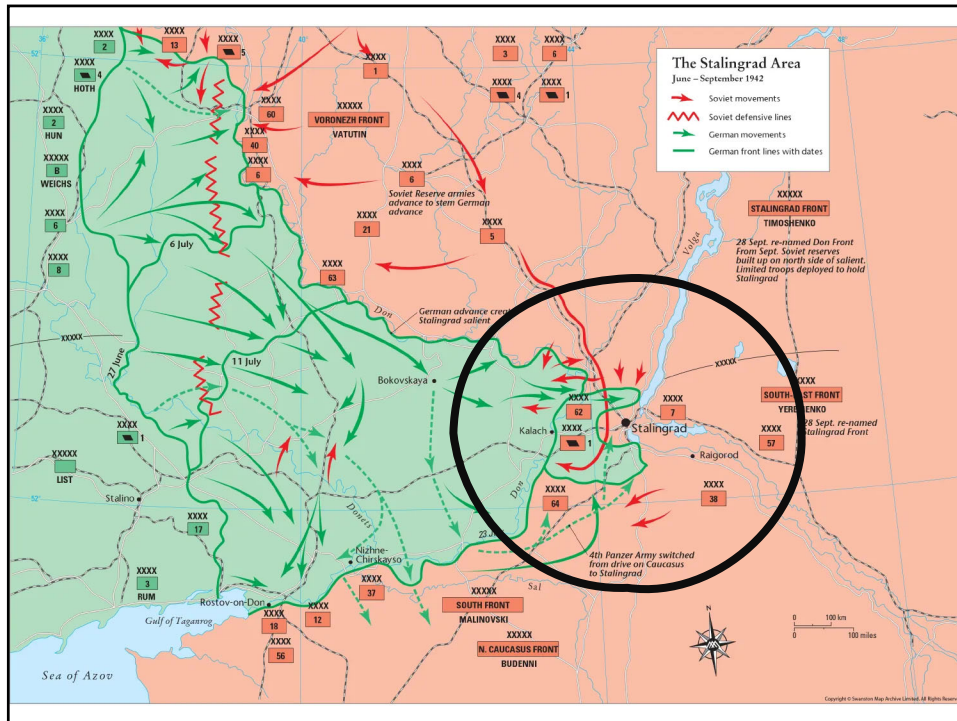
~Konrad Jarausch, *Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 373.  
Jarausch studied memoirs, letters, diaries written by “Weimar babies”

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As more generations of Germans lose touch with the Nazi past, will the “standard excuses” persist, dissipate, or intensify?

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## Stalingrad January 1943

- Defeat created an existential crisis for Germans
- “total war campaign” – Joseph Goebbels
- All or nothing; “fighting to the bitter end”; apocalyptic struggle
- Community of Fate = “*Schicksalgemeinschaft*”



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## Germans after Stalingrad

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## Willy Reese, "Carnival"

Murdered the Jews,  
marched into Russia  
as a roaring horde,  
tyrannized the people,  
hacked them in blood,  
led by a clown,  
raging in blood,  
everyone knows  
what we bring.

1943. Soldier on the eastern front appalled by what he had done. Quoted by Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 275.

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## Victims of Allied air attacks

“Overall, more German soldiers were killed in action between July 20, 1944 ... and May 8, 1945, than in the entire previous five years of war. January and February 1945 were the deadliest months of the entire Second World War.”

~Michael Geyer, “Endkampf 1918 and 1945: German Nationalism, Annihilation, and Self-Destruction,” in *No Man's Land of Violence* (2006), 37

Average number of German Civilians died in 1944 air raids: 127 daily  
Average number in 1945: more than 1,000 daily

~Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction* (2008), 649-650.



2006

13-15 February 1945

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## Peter Fritzsche's Evaluation

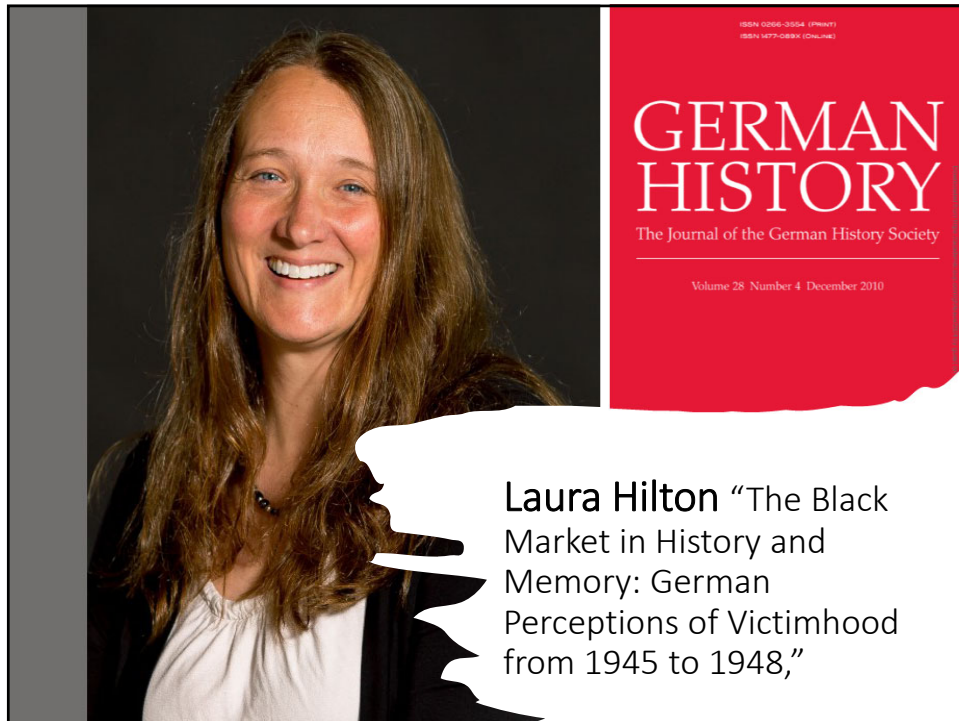
“... Germans came to perceive themselves as the victims of a cruel history, in which a series of catastrophes, from Stalingrad to the air raids on German cities to the displacement of millions of people from eastern Germany to the occupation of the country by foreign troops, combined into something that smashed into everyday existence.”

“Bombing, rape, evacuation – this is the horrible battering Germans remembered, although they usually failed to remember their own determination a year or so earlier, in the summer of 1943 or the fall of 1944, in the face of doubt and fear, to fight on. They tended to recollect war as a series of sudden, dramatic disaster that tore apart the order of peaceful communities when bombs began to fall, or when refugees from bombed-out cities poured in, or when Allied troops appeared.”

*Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 273, 291-292.

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The image features a portrait of Laura Hilton on the left, a smiling woman with long brown hair. To her right is the cover of the journal 'GERMAN HISTORY', which is red with white text. The cover includes the journal's title, 'The Journal of the German History Society', and the issue information: 'Volume 28 Number 4 December 2010'. A white callout box with a jagged edge points to the portrait and contains the following text:

**Laura Hilton** “The Black Market in History and Memory: German Perceptions of Victimhood from 1945 to 1948,”

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## Laura Hilton & Post War Black Market – still the victims!

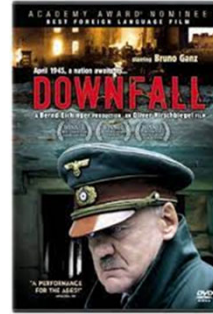
- Who did Germans blame for resorting to this “criminal” behavior?
  - ✓ Foreigners & Jews (i.e. displaced persons)
  - ✓ Allies
- Who did they not blame?
  - ✓ Nazi regime
  - ✓ War started by Hitler
  - ✓ Themselves

“The Black Market in History and Memory: German Perceptions of Victimhood from 1945 to 1948,” *German History*, 28, no. 4 (2010): 479-497.

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## Sabine Hake on *Downfall*

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*Screen Nazis: Cinema, History and Democracy* (Wisconsin Film Studies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 228

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## Axel Bangert & moral equivalency

- Post-1990s films portray Germans as victims
- Finds fault with this when the film makers appropriate language or visuals of the Holocaust.



*The Nazi Past in Contemporary German Film: Viewing Experiences of Intimacy and Immersion* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2014), 106.

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## Traudl Junge *Downfall* (2008)



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## A Woman in Berlin

- Berlin: minimally 100,000 women were raped by Soviet soldiers;
- 2 million German women in 1945
- Rape as a collective experience largely ignored in film until recently

2008



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## Germans and Nazis on Trial

*Sealed Verdict* 1948

*Council of Gods (Der Rat der Götter)* 1950

*The Twilight Zone: Deaths-Head Revisited* 1959

*Judgment at Nuremberg* 1961

*Man in the Glass Booth* 1975

*The Rose Garden* 1989

*The Music Box* 1989

*Just a Matter of Duty (Die Denunziation)* 1993

*After the Truth (Nichts als die Wahrheit)* 1999

*The Statement* 2003

*Nuremberg: Goering's Last Stand* 2006

*Eichmann* 2007

*Reader, The* 2008

*The Debt* 2010

*Labyrinth of Lies* 2014

*The People vs. Fritz Bauer (Der Staat Gegen Fritz Bauer)* 2015

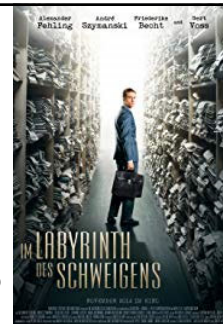
*Eichmann Show* 2015

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## *Labyrinth of Lies (Im Labyrinth des Schweigens, 2014)*

### Facts behind the film:

- Challenges to bringing about the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (1963-1965); investigation began in 1958 in the state (Land) of Hesse.
- Fritz Bauer appointed three young lawyers, less likely to have ties to Nazism, to investigate Germans accused of crimes at Auschwitz.
- Young prosecutors knew little about details of Nazi crimes in concentration and extermination camps.
- Prosecutors did face obstacles: investigation unpopular with older colleagues who had ties to the Nazi era; budget limited; sabotage from within; felt isolated; enormous workload.
- 1871 law defining jurisdiction and statute of limitations that would expire for murder in 1965 created a sense of urgency.
- Hermann Langbein crucial to investigation by locating concentration camp inmates who could bear witness.
- Trigger event was a victim reported that he had seen a guard from Auschwitz on the street. (Random sightings were the most common trigger event.) First person arrested in late 1958.
- The main protagonist is an invented character.



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Complexities of the  
Times? Authenticity?  
Discourse of History?

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Myth

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