

Nazi perpetrator, center-stage by Olaf Möller

The end of World War II was a traumatic experience for the vast majority of the German population living in the Reich, as well as those serving in its armed forces abroad. Today, we might like to believe that people simply must have happily rejoiced over the end of Nazism and the advent of peace. In reality, the majority of Germans might have whole-heartedly abhorred the extremes of Nazi politics but were otherwise in accord with their core beliefs, prejudices, aims and incentives. For them, thus, the end of World War II meant defeat, loss of territory, occupation, and subjugation under foreign laws, yet no end to the most immediate problems: the lack of housing and scarcity of food. Simply put: most Germans felt vanquished, not liberated. Look at newsreel material from that period and see the mix of exhaustion, fear and hate in so many faces...

Long before May 8th, 1945, it was clear that the war would be lost. If we take the defeat of the Reich's armed forces first at Stalingrad on February 2nd, 1943, then in the Battle of Kursk ("Operation Citadel") on July 16th, 1943, as the great twin turning point, it would take another 22 months for things to end. Two years is a long time for a society to unravel, for an army to disintegrate... Come April 1945, there is little left that holds things together. Instead, times are determined by safe self-interest and short-term alliances - whatever helps you survive.

This is the world of Willi Herold, a young soldier who stopped caring and would do whatever it takes to see another dawn. Willi played along. Willi liked the role he took on when wearing that career soldier's captain uniform. Willi relished being feared. Willi made the savage heart of fascism flesh and ashes with his crimes. Willi is a con man, a looter, and a mass murderer. As portrayed by Robert Schwentke, Willi Herold is scared for his own life while callous about anybody else's worldly existence. He is a man of quick wit, adaptability and learning abilities, living in a world eager to believe in anything or anyone. All people needed, was the promise to get a problem solved, get food on the table or get a girl into bed. And Willy tried to oblige.

Willi Herold is also a man more calculating and ruthless characters like Kipinski might attach themselves to, the same way that more hapless and helpless types like Freytag try to stay out of harm's way in his company. Maybe Willi Herold was a psychopath – maybe he was just a man of his time. What he was not, is an exception, a singular occurrence, for there were more than 400 cases of crimes in nature (if not necessarily in scale) similar to those committed by Herold and his flying drumhead. Willi Herold is a character most decidedly worthy of our attention.

And yet, German cinema has not yet seen a character like Willi Herold, certainly not center-stage. This is not surprising, considering how few FRG films in general there are about soldiering during the spring of 1945. On the other hand, some of the most famous works of West Germany's post-war cinema are either set in that period or at least relate to it. And so is (at least) one classic of East German cinema, Konrad Wolf's epochal *I was Nineteen* (*Ich war neunzehn*, 1968). But let's leave the GDR's film production aside here, since it followed very different ideological (as well as artistic) parameters which eventually vanished with the state itself. In a German context, *The Captain* (*Der Hauptmann*) refers to the cinema of the so-called Bonn Republic (1949-1990), for it is at this film culture's fringes, just out of sight, that Willi Herold always lurked.

The earliest important example of a war movie set during the first months of 1945 is probably Paul May's *08/15 at Home* (*08/15 in der Heimat*, 1955), which is the final chapter of a vastly successful trilogy. The film follows (fictive) Wehrmacht PFC Herbert Asch throughout World War II, starting at basic training and ending in the chaos of early 1945. German audiences would understand that the main character's name is an ironic corruption of the German word "Arsch" (meaning: arse), as PFC "Arse" was a common term for the ordinary soldier, meaning the millions of men every armed force's corps is made of. In short: Asch was the German World War II soldier. In *08/15 at Home*, Herbert Asch is anticipating the end of the war, tired of fighting, while trying to prevent some Nazis from going underground with a treasure of platinum. Asch is a decent guy, just like one of his commanding officers who doesn't fight captivity during the US-American occupation.

He assumes responsibility for his deeds and accepts his failure both as a soldier and a citizen. In that respect *08/15 at Home* is the complete opposite of *The Captain*. In Paul May's film, there is good and bad, always clearly separated. In Robert Schwentke's film, evil comes in all shades, some of which might have their useful or even helpful aspects. In Paul May's film, the crime is spectacular and singular, in Robert Schwentke's film, it's manifold, ranging from the petty to the outrageously horrible.

There couldn't be a Willi Herold in Bonn Republic cinema, especially not during its early years, since the common soldier serving the Wehrmacht, the Reichsmarine or the Luftwaffe on German screens eventually had to be portrayed as the good guy for political and commercial reasons: While the Adenauer government (1949-1963) needed the image of an essentially honourable Wehrmacht to justify the founding of West Germany's new armed forces, the Bundeswehr, local film producers and distributors were in need of characters their audience would want to identify with, which for the male viewers meant *ao.* soldier types that reassured them of their moral rectitude, as well as their suffering's meaningfulness. The bad ones were invariably Nazis which meant party members in positions high and low, Gestapo (= secret police) operatives, as well as soldiers from the party's own forces like SA or SS.

Even troublemakers like the great director Wolfgang Staudte respected this unwritten rule in his two main films that (partly) play during the end of World War II and deal with soldiers. The satire *Roses for the Prosecutor* (*Rosen für den Staatsanwalt*, 1959), set partly in April 1945, has the former grunt Rudi Kleinschmidt sentenced to death by an overzealous army judge for stealing a package of chocolates. Thanks to an aerial attack, Kleinschmidt gets away – only to meet his tormentor again years later in a now “denazified” Germany, where he can take his revenge. The realist drama *The Fair* (*Kirmes*, 1960) shows a deserter getting betrayed by just about everybody in his home village out of fear for reprisals. In both films, it's the body politic that fails and needs to be looked at critically, not the armed forces as such. That perspective Wolfgang Staudte would explore with his sardonic tragedy *Destination Death* (*Herrenpartie*, 1964), one of the very few works of that period to look at perpetrators from various ranks of the military.

If cinema or television dealt with those who committed war crimes at all, the films would look at the architects and head administrators of genocide, the upper echelon. Theodor Kotulla's *Death Is My Trade* (*Aus einem deutschen Leben* 1977), a Rudolf Höss biopic by way of Robert Merle's novel *Death Is My Trade* (*La mort est mon métier*, 1952), or Heinz Schirk's teleplay detailing the Final Solution's decisive discussion, *The Final Solution: The Wannsee Conference* (*Die Wannseekonferenz*, 1984) are good examples. And yet, a Hitler equivalent for Carlo Lizzani's wry, dry and decidedly myth-proof *Mussolini: The Last Four Days* (*Mussolini ultimo atto*, 1974) has yet to be made...

No German film so far has shown the totality of Nazi Germany's collective collapse at the final stage of World War II the way *The Captain* does: as a free-for-all, dog-eat-dog world where civilians and soldiers, party functionaries and state administrators are willing to see everybody else get maimed or murdered – as long as it gets them through to the end alive. And if a little profit can be turned by ripping off the state or one's neighbor – even better. Here, the prospect of getting reimbursed for injuries not suffered and imaginary losses incurred gets you a roast with dumplings, the prospect of seeing a judicial dilemma solved (by mass execution) gets you honours and a roof over your head.

The two closest relatives for *The Captain*, both similarly based on true crimes, are again to be found in 50s German cinema: Helmut Käutner's comedy with melancholic linings, *The Captain from Köpenick* (*Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*, 1956) and Robert Siodmack's *The Devil Strikes at Night* (*Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam*, 1957). *The Captain from Köpenick* shows another common man who puts on a captain's uniform – only that cobbler Wilhelm Voigt is a loveable fellow and a petty criminal whose con exposes Prussia's militaristic-authoritarian heart in all its ridiculous absurdity. *The Devil Strikes at Night*, then, was the lone local example of a war noir: Siodmack details the hunt for a serial killer whose existence the Nazis want to cover up, even if that means getting rid of the cop investigating the case.

Willi Herold also exposes the absurdities of bureaucracy, and how to best abuse them, which ends not in laughter but in a mass grave. Befitting this tale of homicidal fury, *The Captain* looks like a film noir storyboarded by Flemish woodcut artist Frans Masereel: all expressionistic angles, trance-like acting, many an eerie silence blown up by sudden splashes of acidic humour, with the occasional stab of a gruesome and wise surrealism. When during the punk-fuelled final credits, Willi Herold and his merry band of mass murderers wreck symbolic havoc in a small town in present-day Germany and play pranks on perplexed passers-by, something long suppressed in German film history finally breaks free. Historical research has long shown how easily people from each walk of life, class and stratum could succumb to the darkness of war and become part of a mass murdering detail, be turned into torturers and killers, rob and rape, or just take advantage of other people's willingness to do all this and worse. With the story of Willi Herold in *The Captain*, German cinema finally acknowledges the true horror of war: human frailty, and a will for indifference when it comes to the suffering of other human beings.