

International Press Review



“...a turning point in German television.” *Der Spiegel*

BETA

DER SPIEGEL

“The cruelly precise World War II drama “Generation War” finally breaks a silence between generations. It marks a turning point in German television.”

Bild

“the most important TV movie of the year”

**The
Economist**

“rarely has such a programme triggered as much debate and interest”

theguardian

“gripping drama with the confidence to confront the past”

★ stern

“truthful, gripping, compassionate – a great television event”

Frankfurter Allgemeine
ZEITUNG FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

“An epoch-making three-parter... the last chance to relate the history of the war across the generations”

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MailOnline

“sensitively done and brilliantly acted”

n p r

“Germany wades in up to its own neck with a viscerally unsparing drama.”

“Generation War holds the line admirably in showing how totalitarianism corrupts almost everything in its path, individual responsibility included, and creates an appalling space where sadists and conformists alike can flourish and break every rule of war at will.”

RadioTimes

“Generation War marks a new departure in portraying the war in Germany.
controversial, high-quality, gripping mini-series”

ALL LIGHTS
FILM MAGAZINE

“It was in 1993 when Stephen Spielberg’s war flick ‘Schindler’s List’ came up with the barbaric side of the German soldiers during World War-II. In 2013, it is Beta Films that creates a stir in the German media with its latest miniseries drama ‘Generation War’.”

“sparking off hot debatable matter for discussion.”

FILM JOURNAL
INTERNATIONAL

“a big-screen anti-war epic.”

“first-class ride into an ugly period of history.”

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Süddeutsche Zeitung

“epochal“



“uncompromising, wonderfully acted, an absolute must-see!”

encore

“A Film, Eight Years in the Making, That Has Sparked A Passionate Discussion.”

“insightfully reveals a country still grappling with how previous generations could have let themselves become so tragically misdirected.”

Film-Forward

“Generation War sweeps away a half century of World War II clichés that most Americans usually see in the movies.”

TrustMovies

“...richly provocative and equally unsettling.”

Denver
Film
Society

“...this three-part epic turns on a meditation about guilt and innocence.”

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Berliner Morgenpost

“The story of the totally normal, youthful representative of our past touches a truth in our souls. One should talk about this – especially with the members of the war generation. As long as this is still possible.”

Berliner Zeitung

“tough, uncompromising – a grandiose anti-war film”

WESER KURIER

“Grandiose war epic!”



“...extraordinary performances.”

“Valor, courage, and betrayal come to the fore in this powerful German epic that shows the everyday realities of wartime life from a deeply personal perspective.”

the village VOICE

“The relative rarity of German perspectives on the war is owed in part to the idea that, especially at the movies, history is recounted by the winners, and in Hollywood, those winners tend to be American.”

“Generation War seeks the epic, creating multiple, lavishly realized worlds and moving with confidence between them.”

BETA

Generation War: Film Review

8:51 AM PST 1/19/2014 by John DeFore

The Bottom Line

Involving, if sometimes dubious, attempt to soften history's view of those who fought Hitler's war.

Philipp Kadelbach's long-form drama follows five young German friends over the course of WWII.

Hugely successful as a TV miniseries in its native Germany, **Philipp Kadelbach's** *Generation War* centers on five close friends whose diverging and reconnecting paths give each a very different experience of the Second World War. Presented there with a title that translates *Our Mothers, Our Fathers*, the project aims to humanize a generation mostly unheard from since the war's end, envisioning how decent people participated in a campaign they realized was doomed long before the Third Reich fell. Well-made and at least partly successful in dramatic terms, the film should draw attention in art house bookings, where it has been broken into two feature-length chapters; though its perspective will prove over-forgiving for many non-Germans, interest in a video release should be respectable.

The film has drawn protests in Poland over its depiction of a band of Polish resistance fighters who are as disgusted by Jews as their enemies are. This outrage has been presented as condemnation of German filmmakers seeking to spread Holocaust guilt around.

But **Wladyslaw Pasikowski's** recent *Aftermath*, a homegrown film inspired by true stories of Polish anti-Semitic atrocities, was greeted with similar complaints, suggesting that critics' real interest is in whitewashing history, pretending violence against Jews began and ended in Germany.

As for the quintet of friends at the heart of this story, none emerges from the war wholly innocent, but none participates directly in the Nazis' greatest crimes. (In fact, though one sequence shows us a train full of Jews unwittingly headed toward their deaths, the film never makes its way to a concentration camp.) The protagonists even get a small inoculation against our decades-later judgment: The four Aryans among them can honestly make the claim, "One of my best friends is a Jew."

That Jew, Viktor (**Ludwig Trepte**), is a young tailor whose father refuses to believe, even as he's sewing a yellow star on his coat, that his fellow Germans will really forget his loyalty to the nation. Viktor is in a relationship with Greta (**Katharina Schuttler**), a barmaid who aspires to be the next **Marlene Dietrich**. Wholesome, cheerful Charly (**Miriam Stein**, who could play **Emma Watson's** sister some time) is a nurse about to begin duty at a field hospital near the Russian front; she secretly loves Wilhelm (**Volker Bruch**), a lieutenant headed off to fight nearby, where he'll be accompanied by his bookish, moral brother Friedhelm (**Tom Schilling**). Wilhelm loves Charly too, but neither admits it on the last night the friends spend together in Berlin -- dancing to forbidden jazz recorded by African-Americans, assuring each other on this June evening that the war will be won in time for a Christmas reunion.

THE Hollywood REPORTER

That's not to be, of course. Wilhelm serves as occasional narrator from the front, first describing the "euphoria of speed" with which his troops advance toward Moscow but, as months pass and setbacks arise, chronicling a growing pessimism. Friedhelm serves under his brother. Stefan Kolditz's script gives both soldiers a chance to register horror at the brutality of their superiors -- they try to save a civilian child, only to see a sadistic officer shoot her point blank -- but atrocities affect them in very different ways. In both cases, the film offers psychologically convincing scenarios in which fundamentally decent men find themselves committing damnable crimes.

Some of the characters' sins begin as compromises we might identify with, as when Greta starts sleeping with a Gestapo officer (**Mark Waschke**) in order to secure papers allowing Viktor safe passage out of Germany. (Unsurprisingly, Viktor doesn't get off that easily.) Others are heartbreaking capitulations to the racist mores of the day. But each character's path takes him places we don't expect.

These ever-more-twisty journeys manage to keep *Generation War* involving for nearly five hours straight. Kadelbach's battle scenes are capably staged and sometimes exciting, but they're never as intense as the best of their American counterparts. For melodrama, however, the film gives Hollywood a run for its money. These five characters bump into each other in increasingly unlikely ways; in the final hour or two, the coincidences become real howlers -- the Eastern Front comes to seem like a very small place indeed.

All five actors make these convolutions credible, which isn't quite to say that the film itself rings true. At its heart, *Generation War* argues that its heroes' self-sacrifice deserves some respect, despite being made in support of a hideous cause. It's easy enough to understand that sentiment taking root with the baffled, guilt-plagued grandchildren of men and women who rarely if ever spoke up about their experiences in Nazi Germany. For the rest of the world, this particular effort at sense-making isn't always easy to swallow.

3/21/2013 by Scott Roxborough

MIPTV 2013: German Series Sparks National Debate About War History

“Generation War,” billed as a German “Band of Brothers,” follows the lives of five friends from 1939-1945.

COLOGNE, Germany – A miniseries billed as a German *Band of Brothers* has become a ratings hit here and sparked a nationwide discussion about the role of ordinary Germans during WWII.

The six-hour series *Generation War* depicts the lives of five German friends from 1939-1945. Most of the series is set among the German Wehrmacht - the regular German armed forces, not the Nazi-controlled Waffen SS - and occurs on the Eastern Front, the site of the most brutal acts of violence by the German army in World War II. That violence is at the core of *Generation War*, something that sets the series apart from previous German TV shows set during WWII. Also central to the series is the idea of personal complicity and burden of guilt on ordinary Germans for the Nazi atrocities.

In addition to drawing record ratings for public broadcaster ZDF over three nights – 7.6 million viewers, a 24 percent share of the German audience, saw the series finale Wednesday night - *Generation War* has begun a heated discussion in the media here over history and personal responsibility. The debate is arguably on a scale last seen following the release of Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993).

“Were German Soldiers Really So Barbaric?” was one front page headline in leading German tabloid *Bild*, which, like many newspapers and websites here, called on wartime veterans and family members to share their personal memories of the time. Yes, they were, was *Bild's* conclusion.

German critics have been nearly universal in their praise for the series, with *Der Spiegel* calling it a “turning point in German television” and a review in national newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* said *Generation War* provides “the first and last chance .. to ask grandparents about their true biographies, their immoral compromises ... the missed chances to act – everything which, in masses, leads to catastrophe”.

Historic dramas set during WWII are nothing new for German TV but in the past they have been more costume melodramas that shied away both from the raw violence of the period and uncomfortable historic truths. In scenes that are certain to make *Generation War* as controversial East of Berlin as it is in Germany, some of the Polish partisans fighting the invading Nazis are depicted as Anti-Semites.

“We tried to filter out all the conventions that are usually used in telling stories from the war on German TV, such as using a love story to provide the dramatic arc,” said Nico Hoffmann of Berlin-based teamWorx, speaking to *THR* at television industry conference MIPCOM last fall, where the producers unveiled the first footage of the series. “Instead we wanted to get as close to the documented facts as we could.” Hoffman cites *Band of Brothers* as an inspiration for the style of *Generation War* although the characters in the German series are fictional.

TeamWorx produced *Generation War* for ZDF and Austrian public broadcaster ORF in association with Jan Mojto's Beta Film. Beta is selling the series to international buyers at MIP TV in Cannes next month.



Film Review: 'Generation War'

January 16, 2014 | 07:27AM PT

An overly melodramatic but fairly engrossing bigscreen version of Phillip Kadelbach's epic serial.

Rob Nelson

Aired in three episodes on German TV, "Generation War" retains the feel of an epic serial in its two-part bigscreen form. Eight years in the making and nearly five hours in length, director Phillip Kadelbach's overly melodramatic but fairly engrossing exploration of World War II-era German guilt and responsibility follows a quintet of young Berlin friends from the eve of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 to war's end in '45. Limited U.S. theatrical play, beginning at New York's Film Forum, will attract the arthouse-attending subset of WWII buffs, while ancillary action looks to pack more firepower.

Having triggered European debate over the savagery of German armed forces depicted (and the anti-Semitism of non-German characters), Kadelbach and screenwriter Stefan Kolditz can indeed be accused of providing undue narrative shortcuts even as the pic's running time stretches far and wide. So, too, the movie can easily be read as a work of apologia, such is its tendency to simplify issues around the culpability of German soldiers and civilians alike.

The film (known as "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" in Germany) principally follows gung-ho careerist lieutenant Wilhelm Winter (Volker Bruch), who's loved by a shy young nurse named Charlotte (Miriam Stein), and Wilhelm's younger brother, Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), whose relative sensitivity is marked rather obviously by his love of poetry. One of the brothers' friends, Greta (Katharina Schuttler), is an aspiring singer whose boyfriend, Viktor (Ludwig Trepte), is Jewish. When an SS officer blackmails her into sleeping with him, Greta is tempted to take the offer and realize her dream to be a star.

The five characters somehow manage to cross paths across miles and years as the film begins to resemble soap opera more than historical drama. Thesping is strong, particularly by Bruch and Schilling as brothers with opposite ways of dealing with the horror of combat, and by Schuttler as a Marlene Dietrich wannabe, although the movie's standout achievements are technical. Battle scenes feel exceptionally harrowing thanks to Thomas Stammer's detailed production design and David Slama's sharp HD lensing.

Film Review: 'Generation War'

Reviewed on DVD, Minneapolis, Minn., Jan. 10, 2014. Running time: 279

Generation War: what did you make of BBC2's German drama?

The subtitled mini-series about five friends in the Third Reich, which drew to a close at the weekend, caused controversy and had its flaws. But did it also show a different side to war?

Does [drama](#) have to be an accurate depiction of history? [Generation War](#), the third part of which concluded on Saturday night, took a Mauser C96 to this question and shot it in the head, while murmuring a Marlene Dietrich song through painted lips. There's no question that this was a fictional portrayal. But did it take too many liberties? And does that matter?

More than seven million Germans tuned into the [second world war](#) mini-series, Generation War (originally in German, Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter – Our Mothers, Our Fathers). Labelled "[Germany's Band of Brothers](#)", no television programme has ever caused as much debate in German society. The initial response that it was brave and original soon turned into accusations of [being overly sympathetic to the Nazis](#). Several leading historians criticised the drama for showing "all Germans as victims" and for failing to depict the powerful ideology of the period.

When, in November 2013, plans were announced to air the series here, Polish protesters [gathered outside the BBC](#) under the slogan: "Stop Nazi Propaganda." They were incensed by the depiction of Polish partisans as antisemitic. The Spectator [dismissed it as "cheesy hackwork"](#). Martha Kearney, presenting Saturday's night's postmortem panel show, used the words "five hours of self-pity". The strange thing for me is that I agree with most of the criticisms of Generation War. But I also thought it was one of the most interesting and moving things I have seen on television in a while: superbly acted, gripping and challenging. The moral collapse of Nazi officer Wilhelm Winter (the Don Draper of the piece) was brilliantly captured: it's rare for an audience not to know how to respond to a character but there was a fantastic ambiguity to his downfall. Likewise Charly, the volunteer nurse who betrayed a Jewish colleague at the earliest opportunity. She was utterly spineless and pathetic. And still we could not bring ourselves to hate her.

Yes, there were moments when I thought: "Well, that just wouldn't have happened." Especially when the surviving friends just happen to turn up at exactly the same time at the bar where they partied four years previously. From the start, the "five friends" set-up was way too chocolate-box. But, over all, it used its narrative freedom wisely and creatively.

On the panel show [Generation War: Fact and Fiction](#), the series producer Benjamin Benedict mounted a spirited defence of the extensive research behind the programme. Was it implausible that four childhood friends would have been casually hanging out with a Jewish mate in 1941, especially when one of them had just served in the army in Poland? Possibly. But it's not out of the question. There are accounts of such unlikely friendships. Were all leaders of Polish partisan groups sadistic and antisemitic? Certainly not. Many helped the Jews. But is it possible that one of them could have behaved in this way? Yes.

With the attractiveness of the actors and the almost sepia-toned quality of some of the shots, there was a tendency towards "Mad Men go Gestapo". But, if anything, this was what made Generation War great narrative drama. It wasn't didactic and worthy. It wasn't afraid of the trade-off between emotional depth and politically correct objectivity. It may not be the most historically responsible depiction of the Third Reich. But it made its audience identify with characters for whom they would usually feel zero empathy. That is a huge achievement. Generation War didn't ask us to hug a Nazi. It just asked us to imagine what it felt like to be one.

Posted by

[Viv Groskop](#)

Monday 12 May 2014 13.00 BST theguardian.com

Generation War review: gripping drama with the confidence to confront the past

Coming from Germany, this is a brave and moving mini-series about what war does to friends and family

[Sam Wollaston](#), Monday 28 April 2014

I think it's the red dress that does it for me, starts me off in [Generation War: Our Mothers, Our Fathers](#) (BBC2, Saturday). It's often the little things, a moment of loveliness when everything else is getting so very unlovely, a reminder of beauty, tenderness, humanity. Like the girl in the red coat in Schindler's List. Red clothes, they make you (me) cry.

The dress is from Viktor the tailor who has been making it for ages for his girlfriend, Greta. He leaves it on the bed because she's not there: she's off with the Nazi officer, betraying Viktor. (Betrayal crops up a lot in Philipp Kadelbach's epic three-part German mini-series). But Greta is also saving Viktor, bravely and selflessly, because she loves him; the Nazi officer could be Viktor's ticket out of there, a chance of survival. This is Berlin, 1941; Viktor is Jewish. He's going away, to America he hopes, she hopes, we hope. Whatever, it will be very hard for Greta and Viktor to see each other ever again.

Greta, Viktor, brothers Wilhelm and Friedhelm, and Charly are five twentysomethings, friends since kindergarten who – perhaps strangely, given what's going on around them – feel optimistic about life, immortal, as if the future belongs to them. Wilhelm promises his mother that he'll bring his bookish younger brother back when they set off for the Eastern Front. Charly, too, is heading that way, to volunteer at a field hospital, do her bit and help people.

The five have a farewell evening together, with booze and jazz, love and laughter. And a group photo. They'll see each other again soon, Christmas in Berlin, pick up where they left off. Nothing will ever come between them ...

Except it does, of course. A barbaric regime and a terrible war tear them apart, strip them of their innocence and their optimism, harden and dehumanise them.

The two soldier brothers, pushing into Stalin's Russia, don't just witness atrocities, they take part in them. Well, Lieutenant Wilhelm does; he executes a Russian prisoner – he has to. Friedhelm is seen as a coward and a traitor by the company.

They beat him up; Wilhelm allows them to. Wilhelm is the commanding officer now, not the protective elder brother. But then later it's Friedhelm's idea to get the prisoners to walk ahead to detonate mines. "I was right," he tells his elder brother, "this war would only bring out the worst in us."

There is one more moment of brotherliness for them, a play fight in the snow, a brief reminder of happier days (and more tears here, obviously). But Wilhelm's promise to their mother is looking less and less likely to be kept. As does the one made between the five friends, about staying friends, and about Christmas in Berlin.

Some way back from the front, at the hospital, Charly, too, is encountering the horrible reality of war and death. And betrayal – on her own part. She turns in the woman – a Jewish doctor – who has not just helped her, but been a friend as well. Nooooo!

That's what Generation War is about, and why it's so powerful. Not just a gripping, moving (weepy) [drama](#) about friendship and family and what war can do to them, plus a rare (for us) look at it from a German perspective. But also one that isn't afraid to confront the question of how normal, clever, educated, likable people could somehow have become blinded by and swept up in such barbaric inhumanity.

theguardian

Yes, they are victims too (Viktor especially). But as the drama, and the war, goes on, and one sort of innocence (of youth and peace) is blasted and frozen away, another sort of innocence (the opposite of guilt) becomes less clear.

It's bold and brave – both in itself, and especially because it was made in Germany. It almost certainly wouldn't have been until recently and shows a confidence to confront the past. Any later, though and it would have been, if not too late, then certainly less meaningful and less powerful. I don't know how this is all going to end up. But if Greta, Viktor, Wilhelm, Friedhelm and Charly were real and in their early twenties in 1941, then it's just possible that they could still be around today. Certainly, for many Germans, they are still Their Mothers, Their Fathers. Generation War isn't over.

BETA

Mar 27th 2013, 4:07 from **print edition**

A new television drama about wartime Germany stirs up controversy

Fighting a losing war

GERMAN television viewers are used to frequent programmes exploring the Nazi era and the second world war. But rarely has such a programme triggered as much debate and interest as the screening in mid-March of a three-part drama, “*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*” (Our Mothers, Our Fathers), which tracks the lives of five young German friends from 1941 to 1945.

The fictional drama, based on scrupulous research, had on average 7.6m viewers per night. Suddenly the few survivors of Germany’s wartime generation are being sought out as never before by talk shows and newspapers. Grandfathers and grandmothers, who for years kept silent, or were never asked, are facing questions about how it could happen, what it was like and whether they saw atrocities. Some more painful questions about who committed what atrocity are resurfacing, too.

In this section

Nearly 70 years after the end of the Third Reich, Germans feel compelled to keep their country’s Nazi history alive. “It’s not about guilt any more, but it is about collective responsibility,” says Arnd Bauerkämper, professor of history and cultural studies at the Free University in Berlin. The suspicion, however irrational, says *Der Spiegel*, a weekly, is that the German people are a special case, a historical outlier, who are unsure of themselves and must time and again seek reassurance. “It’s never over,” read a headline for an interview with Nico Hofmann, producer of the series, and a bunch of young Germans in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a daily.

Films such as “Schindler’s List”, “Holocaust”, an American television series, and the German-made “Downfall”, which tracks Hitler’s final days, all caused passing sensations in Germany. Yet they did not prompt the same intergenerational questioning. “*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*” has reminded the public that this is their last chance to talk to survivors.

It seems the actual atrocities were committed by others, not those who are prepared to speak today. Ninety-year-olds now talk of “seeing villages burned” or of how they escaped firing-squad duty. What comes across strongly from these accounts is that after 1943 most intelligent Germans accepted that the war was lost. If they fought on it was out of desperation or camaraderie. Dieter Wellershoff, a writer, interviewed on a popular talk show, said he volunteered for the Hermann Göring tank regiment in 1943 aged 18, after the German defeats in Stalingrad and north Africa, knowing that he was joining a losing war.

All five characters in Mr Hofmann’s film reach that conclusion early on. They are swept along like corks in an ocean. The atrocities two of them commit as soldiers—one executes a Soviet commissar, the other a Jewish girl—seem to come from their circumstances: obey or die. The real war criminals are the others who exult in killing or intellectualise it. That has prompted some critics to suggest that putting five sympathetic young protagonists into a harrowing story just offers the war generation a fresh bunch of excuses. It’s never over.

NEW REPUBLIC

German War Guilt: The Miniseries The country's breakout television series confronts WWII atrocities head on

May 7, 2013 BY THOMAS ROGERS

One hour into "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" ("Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter"), the hit new German miniseries about World War II, a group of German soldiers is trapped in front of a Russian minefield. Among them are two of the series' protagonists, Friedhelm and Wilhelm, brothers from Berlin with strong jaws and very precise haircuts. Friedhelm is a bookish, sympathetic Berliner who has thus far been reluctant to kill anyone while his heroic older brother, Wilhelm, is the group's admired leader. But now they face a problem: How to get themselves to the Russian line?

Unexpectedly, Friedhelm has a suggestion: force some Russian farmers, whom they've recently detained, to walk in front of them. A few minutes later, the first Russian hits a mine, setting off an explosion of mud and blood. Friedhelm stares on, unmoved.

The scene stands out for a couple reasons—not just for its high production values (a rarity in Germany, whose TV offerings tend to be low-budget) but for its frank depiction of wartime atrocity. The minefield scene is, in fact, just one of many horrific acts the two brothers perpetrate over the course of the miniseries, a sweeping television event that has galvanized a new discussion about Germany's war guilt. One of the most ambitious projects in German television history, "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" was ten years in the making and cost an extraordinary (by German standards) 14 million Euros to produce.

It may still find an even bigger audience in the United States, where cross-cultural curiosity about television hasn't typically extended beyond Scandinavia and the UK. A few weeks ago, however, the reputable American art house distributor Music Box Films (which has distributed, among many other films, the Swedish "Girl with a Dragon Tattoo" trilogy, in the United States) announced that it had acquired the American distribution rights for the 4.5-hour series, which will be shown in American movie theaters under the name "Generation War." It's the first show in German history to be given this kind of theatrical distribution in the United States.

With a sprawling narrative structure similar to American series like "Band of Brothers" and "The Pacific," the miniseries follows a group of five Berliners over the final four years of the war on the Eastern front. It begins in 1941, in a Berlin corner bar, at a celebration of Friedhelm and Wilhelm's deployment. There, the two 'helms meet up with their three close childhood friends:

Greta (an aspiring singer) Greta's boyfriend Jakob (the Jewish son of a tailor), and Charlotte (a newly trained nurse). The five friends, all charming and good-looking, celebrate much like any early-twenties group of friends would—by drinking beer, singing, and trying on each others' hats.

By the end of the miniseries, only Jakob emerges morally unscathed. While he joins a group of Polish resistance fighters, Greta begins an affair with a powerful SS lieutenant, at first to save Jakob, but then to advance her singing career. Meanwhile, Charlotte rats out a Jewish nurse working in her hospital, who is then taken away and, presumably, killed. And Friedhelm and Wilhelm both undergo radical transformations over the course of their deployment: After executing a communist leader, Wilhelm grapples with the morality of his orders, while Friedhelm (played by current German cinema It-boy Tom Schilling) goes from pacifist to cold-blooded murderer. At the end of the war, Friedhelm is executing Polish children and hanging Polish villagers in town squares.

Nico Hoffmann, the producer behind the series, has said that he was inspired to create the series by his interactions with his own father, who had long been reluctant to discuss the things he had seen and done during the war. "This is our very last chance to speak openly about this," he told the German magazine *Focus*, referring to the dwindling numbers of surviving WWII veterans.

For most of the postwar era, the popular narrative about the war in Germany claimed that the SS had perpetrated the most egregious crimes of the Nazi regime and the Wehrmacht only participated in "exceptional" cases. But in the last two decades, historians have argued for a far greater Wehrmacht involvement in the killing of Jews, Polish partisans, prisoners of war and many others, especially in the former Soviet Union. The miniseries is the country's most high-profile examination of this broader concept of culpability.

NEW REPUBLIC

Accordingly, each of the miniseries' episodes was followed by a documentary program in which real German veterans discussed their experiences during the war, and viewers were referred to a web page where they could share their own memories or answer questions like "What would you have done?"

It's a formula with some precedents: Over the last several decades, the TV miniseries has become a curiously powerful medium for spurring cultural discussions about history and guilt. In 1977, ABC's "Roots," a nine-part miniseries that followed a black family from the Gambia to American plantations and into the 20th century, launched a new discussion about slavery and African-American history in the U.S. Two years later, NBC's "Holocaust" starring Meryl Streep and James Woods helped to create widespread public interest in the crimes of the Nazi era. In the decades since, American TV has produced sprawling historical miniseries about Christopher Columbus ("Christopher Columbus"), The Civil War, ("North and South"), World War II ("Band of Brothers," "The Pacific," "WWII"), the Kennedys ("Kennedy," "The Kennedys"), the Founders ("John Adams"), the Iraq War ("Generation Kill") and the Nuremberg Trials ("Nuremberg"). It's easy to see what draws networks to this kind of programming: They offer easy name recognition for viewers and are pretty much guaranteed to get media coverage. They also allow audiences to attach themselves to the most momentous aspects of their own history: France, for example, filmed its own "Napoleon" miniseries, the UK "Elizabeth I," Australia "Anzacs," Canada "The Arrow," among many others.

And Germany, with its incredibly fraught relationship with its own past, has in recent years proven to be a remarkably fertile ground for the historical miniseries—although they have tended to be darker than, say, "The Kennedys."

In 1984, "Heimat," a 32-episode series recounting German history from 1919 to 2000, was a widespread critical success. In 2006, the same company behind "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" produced "Dresden," a romance between a British pilot and a German nurse set against the backdrop of the Dresden bombings; 2007's "March of Millions" revolved around the evacuation of East Prussia after WWII; in 2011, "Go West" told the story of three friends trying to escape East Germany. There have also been TV films about Rommel and Stauffenberg, and each of those, to varying degrees, launched media debates about history, atrocity and guilt.

To be truly successful, historical miniseries require a delicate balancing act between historical accuracy, simplicity, and melodrama. (Elie Wiesel notoriously accused "Holocaust" of being "inaccurate and offensive.") Given Germany's horrific history, that can make for an especially fine line to toe. After "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" aired on German TV, Polish TV executives issued an angry complaint to the ZDF, the German public network on which the miniseries aired, about its portrayal of Polish partisan fighters as anti-Semites, and some historians accused it of downplaying the pervasive Nazi ideology of young people at the time. And truth be told, the miniseries' penchant for melodrama can be queasy-making at times. One of its primary subplots involves an unspoken love between Charlotte and Wilfried, but given Wilfried's occasional tendency to shoot innocent Russians, it seems petty to worry about the future of his love life.

Even so, it has been, by most standards, a remarkable success. Some 7.6 million viewers watched its final episode, which amounts to nearly one tenth of the German population, and most major German newspapers published one (or many) columns about the real-life history it portrays.

NEW REPUBLIC

German historian Norbert Frei argued that the miniseries "laid bare ... involvement of the Wehrmacht in the murder of the Jews, the killing of hostages in the Partisan War, the execution of commanders in the Russian army" and called it "important and new." In the *Berliner Morgenpost*, Martin Luecke, a historian at the Freie Universitaet, wrote that the miniseries shows "that the crimes of the Wehrmacht are no longer a taboo—that they are a well-integrated theme in German history." *Bild*, the highest-circulation newspaper in Europe, ran a feature entitled "Were German soldiers really that cruel?" with the sub-headline: "For each German soldier, ten civilians were killed."

When the miniseries arrives in American theaters, it's likely to get a much more subdued reaction, but the fact that Americans will be seeing it at all is a reason for the German television industry to rejoice. The quality of German TV is a popular subject of derision among Germans—the country's most popular programs include "Wetten Dass," a 3-to-4-hour long variety show featuring a strange assortment of uncomfortable-looking American stars, like Justin Timberlake, watching novelty competitions in which, for example, people try to guess how much water is left in a bottle by listening to plunking sounds. (After one lengthy recent appearance on the program, an unhappy Tom Hanks told a German radio program that "In the United States, if you are on a TV show that goes on for four hours, everybody responsible for that show is fired the next day.")

The international sale of "Our Mothers, Our Fathers," producers likely hope, offers an incentive for more ambitious programming. But American audiences will probably be more interested in the glimpse it offers into Germany's evolving attitudes towards its own history. As the number of German veterans continues to dwindle, feelings about the crimes of the Nazi era among younger generations are likely to grow less visceral, but perhaps, hopefully, more objective. As Deutsche Welle, the German broadcaster, put it, the miniseries may be a sign that young Germans "are more willing to learn and ask questions in an open-minded way." If "Our Mothers, Our Fathers" is successful in the U.S., young Americans may soon have a new perspective on German history too.



Love And Struggle In The Shadow Of The Third Reich

January 14, 2014 6:03 PM

The sprawling drama *Generation War* follows a range of characters — a Nazi officer and his brother, a nurse, an aspiring singer and her Jewish boyfriend — through Germany during World War II.

Music Box Films

Generation War

Director: Stefan Kolditz

Genre: Drama

Running Time: 279 minutes

Not rated

In German with subtitles

(Recommended)

Knee-deep already in collective scrutiny of its painful World War II history, Germany wades in up to its own neck with a viscerally unsparing drama — originally a TV miniseries — set to screen in two parts in selected U.S. theaters.

Generation War tracks five jaunty young childhood friends as they prepare to scatter from a Berlin bar in 1941 to do their bit for the Thousand Year Reich. With Kristallnacht fresh in memory and Stalingrad looming, you'd think even these frisky young things might know better than to expect to reunite unscathed for Christmas.

Instead they dance, sing, drink, and try on silly hats — then go forth into four years of carnage and chaos that will shred every illusion they cherish, and squeeze from their shattered minds and bodies every drop of faith in German invincibility.

With its brutal battle sequences and a robustly soapy character arc, the expertly commercial *Generation War* has been compared to the American series *Band of Brothers*. The comparison is not inapt: Series television is uniquely equipped to evoke not just the horrors of full-on battle, but the arguably greater agony soldiers face as they hang around in a perpetual state of emergency, under unspeakable conditions of cold and hunger.

Yet for Germans of all ages, the political and moral stakes are more urgent. For them, two urgent questions hang over the period: Who knew, and All This For What?

Based on testimony from a dwindling supply of Third Reich survivors, the series equivocates on the first question while confronting the second head-on. Writer Stefan Kolditz and director Philipp Kadelbach dispose of the popular myth that the Nazi Wehrmacht — the rank-and-file armed forces — committed fewer atrocities than did the paramilitary SS. *Generation War* forces us to see that cruelty and indifference to suffering were not only practiced institutionally but individually, by nice young people to whom we grow ever more attached even as they progressively alienate us.

Charlotte (Miriam Stein), a Red Cross nurse at the Russian front who's swallowed Nazi anti-Semitism whole, casually betrays a Jewish prisoner she's befriended in the field hospital where both work. Her friend Greta (Katharina Schuttler) tries to save her Jewish lover Viktor (Ludwig Trepke) from deportation to Auschwitz, while sleeping with a senior Nazi officer (Mark Waschke) who furthers her singing career. Wilhelm (Volker Bruch), a gung-ho lieutenant who heaps scorn on his gun-shy younger brother Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), blindly obeys orders to shoot a prisoner, yet turns out to have feet of clay himself.



The series sends all five friends on a bracing journey into despair. It's anything but romantic about individual destiny or just deserts, and unsentimental about the way war rides rough-shod over believers and cynics, careerists and do-gooders alike. Those who survive do so through dumb luck (or handy connections) rather than blind faith — or even the clearer vision of Friedhelm, an intellectual who shies away from ideology. Asked by a new recruit how he's managed to survive as long as he has, Friedhelm replies, "You resist the temptation to be human."

Small acts of courage, mercy and self-sacrifice bob now and then to the surface. But *Generation War* holds the line admirably in showing how totalitarianism corrupts almost everything in its path, individual responsibility included, and creates an appalling space where sadists and conformists alike can flourish and break every rule of war at will.

In this regard, communism fares only a little better than fascism in *Generation War* — which is why this bracing movie ought to be required viewing not just in Germany, where it was seen and hotly debated by more than 7 million viewers, but wherever absolutism holds sway. **(Recommended)**

Los Angeles Times

Review: 'Generation War' takes unsparing look at Germans' part in WWII

The two-part 'Generation War' follows five German friends as they take part in and witness the horrors of World War II. It is an epic, combat-intensive film with a solid ensemble cast.

By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic
February 27, 2014, 5:00 p.m.

Though it comes to Los Angeles as a two-part film, "Generation War" began its life as a three-part German TV series (originally called "Our Mothers, Our Fathers") that was a sensation in its home country.

Eight years in the making, 4 hours, 39 minutes long (and needing two separate admissions during its weeklong run at Landmark's Nuart), "Generation War" attracted millions of viewers on German TV. Its story will be familiar and unfamiliar to American viewers, which is why it holds our interest even when it is not at its best.

On the one hand, there is obviously nothing new in the notion of observing the course of a war through the eyes of attractive young people who start out bright and shiny as new pfennigs and end up considerably more tarnished.

In that sense, "Generation War" is the kind of epic, combat-intensive TV that echoes everything from "Band of Brothers" to "The Winds of War." As written by Stefan Kolditz and directed by Philipp Kadelbach, "Generation War" is also in many ways old-fashioned television, filled with broad strokes and leaning heavily on a flurry of wild coincidences.

"Generation War" has a texture and an interest that American stories do not. Because this is a story of good people who found themselves involved in a bad cause, "Generation War" had an almost "12 Years a Slave" element for German audiences, a sense of wondering, how did we come to believe what we believed, follow who we followed and do what we did.

It also helps to have, as "Generation War" does, attractive and gifted young actors to play the leading parts. With performers this engaging, we never want to stop watching, even as events go from grim to grimmer over four long and bitter years.

"Generation War's" narrator is Wilhelm (Volker Bruch), already a career military officer when the story begins in 1941. He has the responsibility of looking after his newly enlisted bookworm younger brother Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), who insists to anyone who will listen that "the war will bring out the worst in everyone."

We also meet the brothers' trio of friends as the five comrades gather for a last farewell before the war separates them. Charlotte (Miriam Stein) is an idealistic young nurse secretly in love with Wilhelm, while Greta (Katherina Schuttler) is a careerist singer who forms a tight couple with Viktor (Ludwig Trepte), a young Jew with dreams of his own.

Confident that the war will end by Christmas, the five friends take a group photo and then have their loud party ruined by a scolding Nazi functionary (well played by Mark Waschke) who makes it his business to make their lives miserable for as long as he can.

Los Angeles Times

"Generation War" takes place almost exclusively on the Russian front, so Americans are almost nonexistent in its story line. There are involving combat sequences — this may turn out to be the kind of traditional war film the "Monuments Men" audience thought it was getting — and things happen to each of these five friends that are worse than they can imagine, leading to personal crises and even personality changes.

Over and over again, the characters echo Friedhelm and discover that "this isn't the war I was expecting" or "nothing is how I thought it would be," but this wisdom comes too late.

Though some of it is standard, this film can be unflinching in how it depicts German soldiers. We see the murder of civilians, the unthinking embracing of anti-Semitism, the savage battles with Polish partisans, shell shock, desertion and all manner of horrors. "The only winners in this war," a fed-up soldier says, "are the flies. We will fatten them with our flesh." The German version of standard Hollywood heroism "Generation War" is not.

Los Angeles Times

Ghosts of Germany's WWII past rise again in 'Generation War'

'Generation War,' which blends battlefields with ethical relativism, was a hit when it aired on TV last year as a miniseries. But some have criticized it as an assuaging of history and a broadening of blame.

February 27, 2014, 6:00 a.m.

When plans for a Holocaust memorial in Berlin were announced years ago, German writer Martin Walser wondered how many monuments to shame his country would have to build. It was a telling sentiment for a nation that could not cleanse the past yet wanted its young freed from the stain of their Nazi ancestors.

The ruin of [World War II](#) — bones of the fallen are still occasionally dug up in forests outside Berlin — led to decades of national silence, anger, reparation and collective guilt. But in recent years, German artists and filmmakers have sought more nuanced stories and characters, including a frail and bereft Adolf Hitler, who had been cemented in caricature for fear of historical sacrilege and accusations of revisionism.

The new film "Generation War" blends battlefields with ethical relativism. The movie, which opens Friday at Landmark's Nuart Theatre, follows five friends who bid farewell in a bar as they listen to swing music and as war intensifies across the Eastern Front in 1941. "We were immortal," says one of them. But those who return home four years later are shattered by the military folly and brutal conceits of their *Führer*.

The friends are brothers Wilhelm and Friedhelm, both soldiers; Greta, a street-savvy singer; Charlotte, an idealistic nurse; and Viktor, the son of a Jewish tailor. Screenwriter Stefan Kolditz said the film was a "nonideological view on this generation, beyond the clichés of the good and the bad German... This war generation, sometimes called the 'frozen generation,' hadn't talked about this time and their responsibilities for decades. We wanted them to speak."

The 279-minute movie, whose battle scenes evoke the jerky monochromatic intensity of ["Saving Private Ryan,"](#) was both catharsis and hit when it aired as a TV miniseries last year. Sins are laid bare: Wilhelm executes an unarmed Russian POW, Charlotte betrays a Jewish doctor and Greta sleeps with an SS officer. Their humanity and patriotism are tested on a shifting plain of moral accountability, suggesting that a generation of Germans was cudgeled into complicity and was itself a victim of the Third Reich.

The newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* said the film provided the chance "to ask our grandparents about their biographies, the immoral compromises...the missed chances to act." The movie was directed by Philipp Kadelbach, who also directed "Hindenburg: The Last [Flight](#)," a conspiracy tale behind the 1937 crash of a German zeppelin in New Jersey that starred Stacy Keach.

Some writers and European politicians criticized "Generation War" as an assuaging of history and a broadening of blame. Polish resistance fighters come off as murderous anti-Semites, a depiction that drew a formal protest from the Polish government and agitated that country's past over its own questionable treatment of Jews. Others complained that the film did not accurately reflect the racism that seethed in Germany on the eve of war.

Los Angeles Times

"The series tries to draw a distinction between [Nazis](#) and everyday Germans that simply did not exist in any broad way," Laurence Zuckerman wrote this month in *Tablet*, an online Jewish magazine. "The tag line on the movie's poster — 'What happens when the country you love betrays everything you believe?' — is demonstrably false. Most Germans believed in the Nazi agenda."

Questions of guilt and responsibility have echoed for years. In his 1999 book, "On the Natural History of Destruction," W.G. Sebald wrote that Germans in the years immediately after the war "regarded the great firestorms [during the Allied bombing of Dresden] as just punishment, even an act of retribution on the part of a higher power with whom there could be no dispute."

That narrative had shifted by the 60th anniversary of Germany's surrender in 2005. Films and books explored the complicated layers of the past, including the lives of low-ranking soldiers and women raped by Russian troops. The Academy Award-nominated ["Downfall"](#) portrayed Hitler, who had traditionally been a madman in the shadows, as more complex. The *Führer's* hand — in a suggestion of [Parkinson's disease](#) — shook as flawed and broken, he sought refuge in a bunker. The filmmakers argued that the humanizing portrait added a chilling dimension to his evil.

Holding the past up to a varied interpretations led to suggestions of revisionism. "Are the Germans now suddenly seeing themselves in a different light — as a community joined in suffering?" the magazine *Der Spiegel* asked in 2005, a year after "Downfall" was released. "Has the 'nation of perpetrators' become the 'nation of victims'? Has the chapter of self-chastisement now been closed?"

"Generation War" and other films and books suggest that the chapter, if not closed, has been footnoted.

Germany is Europe's largest economy and its capital, Berlin, is one of the most liberal and artistically vibrant in the world. Intriguing questions, however, still linger over how deeply a nation's past should reach into its present, whether it's [the Holocaust](#), genocide in Rwanda, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia or the slavery that led to the [American Civil War](#). "12 Years a Slave," nominated for best picture at this year's [Academy Awards](#), is an indictment that offers no moral equivocations.

But how long do the ghosts persist after those who committed the crimes — or accepted them through silence or inaction — are gone? Screenwriter Kolditz's father, Gottfried, was a soldier on the Eastern Front who later became a successful director. Several of the film's actors also have connections to the past through other performances, including Volker Bruch (Wilhelm) who appeared with [Kate Winslet](#) in "The Reader" about the love affair of an illiterate concentration camp guard.

Kolditz, who spent eight years on "Generation War," said he wanted to understand how a war "beyond every human imagination was led by ordinary young men and women. They weren't the faceless and blind Nazi clichés of ... Hollywood movies, ready to easily get killed by brave American soldiers. But — which is more realistic and much more shocking — they were young men and women who did the most cruel and horrible things, although they weren't killing machines at the beginning."

The movie drew "very emotional reactions" from audiences in France, Australia, Ireland, Sweden and other countries, said Kolditz, whose other screenplays include "Dresden," a miniseries on the war-time fall of that city. "Every reaction, every debate ... helps [us] not to forget." He added: "The movie is very clear in his political and moral statement. There is no cleansing. Collective guilt does not exist without personal guilt."

The New York Times

Movie Review

A History Lesson, Airbrushed

'Generation War' Adds a Glow to a German Era

By [A. O. SCOTT](#) JAN. 14, 2014

"Generation War," which was broadcast as a mini-series on German television last year, is perhaps more interesting as an artifact of the present than as a representation of the past. As the Second World War slips from living memory, as Germany asserts its dominant role in Europe with increasing confidence, and as long-suppressed information emerges from the archives of former Eastern bloc countries, the war's cultural significance for Germans has shifted.

Coming after the silence of the '50s and early '60s and the angry reckonings of the '70s and '80s, "Generation War," emotionally charged but not exactly anguished, represents an attempt to normalize German history. Its lesson is that ordinary Germans — "Our Mothers, Our Fathers," in the original title — were not so different from anyone else, and deserve the empathy and understanding of their grandchildren.

This may, in the abstract, seem fair enough, but the film slips into a strange, queasy zone between naturalism and nostalgia. In effect, it is a plea on behalf of Germans born in the early 1920s for inclusion in a global Greatest Generation, an exercise in selective memory based on the assumption that it's time to let bygones be bygones.

Sensationally [popular](#) in Germany — decidedly less so in [Poland](#), where its depiction of anti-Nazi partisans as unkempt anti-Semites provoked public outrage — "Generation War" tries to assimilate the unfathomable barbarity of the years between the invasion of the Soviet Union and the fall of Berlin into the conventions of popular entertainment. Part melodrama, part combat action movie, the film, written by Stefan Kolditz and directed by Philipp Kadelbach, chronicles the lives of five friends who are presented as more or less typical young Germans.

We first see them together in 1941, after closing time in a Berlin bar, smoking cigarettes, drinking Champagne and dancing to the forbidden strains of American jazz. Two brothers, Wilhelm (Volker Bruch, who provides some voice-over narration) and Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), are about to leave for the Eastern front. Wilhelm, dashing in his lieutenant's uniform, is confident that Stalin's armies will be vanquished by Christmas. He is in love with Charlotte, nicknamed Charly (Miriam Stein), soon to report for duty as a field hospital nurse. She feels the same way about him, but neither has told the other.

Their friends Greta (Katharina Schüttler) and Viktor (Ludwig Trepte) are far less shy, though their relationship is illegal, since Viktor is Jewish. But even an ominous visit from a Gestapo officer — who confiscates their records and warns Greta about the "race shame" of dating a Jew — cannot quell the group's youthful optimism. That will take a genocidal war.

The New York Times

Mr. Kadelbach, the director, has clearly studied the work of Steven Spielberg. He crosscuts deftly between scenes, alternating moments of tense violence with stretches of solitude and tenderness. Battles are staged with “[Saving Private Ryan](#)”-like intensity and precision, and the whole narrative — shifting from the mud and ice of Russia in winter to the wheat fields of Ukraine, the forests of Poland and the streets of the German capital — has a sweep and a vigor that recall “[Gone With the Wind](#)” and other old Hollywood costume epics.

The characters are sharply drawn (by a lively and uniformly excellent cast), their contrasting temperaments providing a pleasing, if not terribly challenging, sense of human variety. Greta is high-strung and passionate. Viktor is wary, excitable and perpetually unshaven. Friedhelm is timid and bookish, a mama’s boy whose stiff-necked father favors the manly and decisive Wilhelm. He and Charly, fair-haired and upright, are like Nazi propaganda posters brought to life and softened up for modern, liberal audiences. They exude a quiet pride in their own virtue.

None of the five friends are Nazi zealots, and none can see the catastrophe that is coming. Viktor’s father, who served in the German Army in World War I and whose tailor shop was destroyed during the state-sponsored anti-Jewish vandalism of Kristallnacht, believes that his fellow Germans will come to their senses “once they see how much they need us.”

Charly and Wilhelm are the most overtly patriotic, but this is more passive acceptance of the reality they have grown up with than the fervent embrace of ideology. They are happy to participate in their country’s heroic destiny and only gradually come to realize that this will involve the murder of innocents, the betrayal of comrades and the destruction of their own ideals.

Both of them witness — and do — terrible things, as do the others. Friedhelm, the most sensitive of the group, is transformed into a cold and effective killer. Greta, having begun an affair with the Gestapo officer who took her music, becomes one of the Reich’s top recording stars. Viktor, escaping from a train bound for Auschwitz, takes up with a group of fighters loyal to the Polish Home Army.

What happens to all of them is absorbing, exciting and sometimes very moving. The moral choices they face are credibly agonizing, even if the plot turns are sometimes a bit forced. (There are only so many times one movie can fool the audience into thinking a major character is dead.) As television drama, “Generation War” is unquestionably effective. As dramatized history, it is pretty questionable.

This has less to do with factual accuracy than with the way facts are shaped, juxtaposed and given emotional weight. The evil of the Nazis is hardly denied, but it is mainly localized within a few cartoonishly sadistic SS and Gestapo commanders, who are nearly as cruel to regular German soldiers as they are to Jews and Russians. There is also an element of moral relativism in the way the film portrays the Polish resistance, whose members hate Jews as much as the Germans, but with worse manners, and the bestial, rampaging members of the Red Army, who have no manners at all.

There is good and bad on all sides, a dash of mercy mixed into the endless violence. But the suggestion that the Nazis were not the only bad guys in Eastern Europe in the early 1940s is undermined by the film’s disinclination to show the very worst of what the Nazis did. We see massacres of Jews by local militias in Ukraine under the supervision of the SS, but “Generation War,” for all its geographical range and military detail, steers clear of the death camps.

The New York Times

This omission has the effect of at least partly restoring the innocence of the characters and of perpetuating the notion that ordinary Germans were duped by the Nazis and ignorant of the extent of their crimes — that they were as much Hitler's victims as his accomplices and did not know what he was doing. They also suffered, after all, but there is something troubling about how the filmmakers apportion this suffering.

The artist, the intellectual and the Jew are all punished, for wantonness, weakness and naïveté, and pushed into extreme states of moral compromise. The chaste, self-sacrificing Aryans, the lieutenant and the nurse, though they are not without guilt, are the heroes of the story, just as they would have been in a German film made in 1943. The moral this time around is that they have, at long last, earned the world's forgiveness.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Generation War: Innocence Drowned

Posted: 01/21/2014 2:55 pm

If you ever wonder just how thin the veneer of civilization is, *Generation War* is a testament to the illusion of man's moral evolution. A searing portrayal of society's collapse of respect for human life, of the enormous losses of a war fought just a scant two generations ago, this film should keep viewers from buying any myths promoting the glory of war.

Generation War was made as a television mini-series, commissioned by Germany's public broadcasting organization, ZDF, and entitled *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* (*Our mothers, our Fathers*). It aired in Germany last spring with a record seven million viewers who, like the filmmakers, continue to grapple with the horrors of the older generation's role in World War II. The film's tagline reflects the conflict: *What happens when the country you love betrays everything you believe?*

Producer Nico Hofmann, along with Director Philipp Kadelbach and writer Stefan Kolditz, felt that the time was right to address with their parents and grandparents the experience of the Third Reich. Hofmann says of all the films he has made of the period, this is the most personal. It fulfills a long-time wish to portray his own family history: the character of Viktor recreates the story of his father, son of a Jewish tailor in Berlin.

Generation War opened in the US this month as a two-part film running 280 minutes, covering five years that feel like a lifetime. The saga opens in 1941 with five upbeat friends in their early twenties toasting their end-of-summer parting for wartime occupations.

They take a photograph, each getting a print of the smiling faces, vowing to reconvene at Christmastime in Berlin. This is just the first of their misconceptions. Exceptional acting carries the drama, an arcing story that takes these well-drawn characters from personal hope and happiness to a place of no return.

Wilhelm Winter is the film's narrator, played beautifully by Volker Bruch. He is his father's son, an upright young officer, a believer in Hitler's goal of a 'final victory'. He leads his platoon to the Eastern front, intent on defeating the Russians. Hand-held camera work depicts the savagery of skirmishes in blown-out buildings, the explosive, erratic gunfire, the random fate of who lives and who doesn't, of how many lives are lost in the taking of a telegraph office.

Tom Schilling plays Friedhelm Winter, Wilhelm's younger brother, the conscience of the story. He is the bookish reader, a pacifist at the outset who has no enthusiasm for the war. But in the repeated heat of battle where he must either kill or be killed, he becomes an effective killing machine.

Ongoing combat yields little but enormous losses- the platoon loses 40% of its men- and when the new recruits arrive and introduce themselves, Friedhelm tells them that if they survive the week, he'll call them by name. "Until then, you're number one, you're two." After a particularly bloody massacre, Friedhelm tells his brother in a rage, "It's all been a mistake from the beginning. There is no point. God has forsaken us."

Ludwig Trepte plays Viktor Goldstein, son of a Jewish tailor. He understands the danger in remaining in Nazi Germany and pleads with his parents to leave, but his father has blinders on and refuses to recognize the threat. He sews a yellow Star of David badge onto a jacket, parroting the explanation that it's for their 'protection.'

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Viktor and Greta Müller (Katharina Schüttler) are committed to each other, but when Viktor goes off with the army, Greta turns her focus to her singing career. As the war progresses and trainloads of Jews disappear out of the city and return empty, she will do anything to save Viktor. Greta is ambitious, and when an SS officer offers to make her the next Marlene Dietrich, she trades this opportunity for Viktor's exit papers. This barter ends up costing her far more than she bargained for.

Miriam Stein plays Charlotte, a nurse assigned to the Eastern Front who is in love with Wilhelm. The youthful innocence she starts with turns on her when she reports that her capable Ukrainian assistant, Liliya, is a Jewish physician. This act, committed in the name of national loyalty, haunts her and she later confesses to sending Liliya to her death. In a twist of fate, Liliya later reappears as an officer of the invading Russian troops and saves Charlotte from rape by a soldier. Charlotte asks her, "Why are you helping me?" Liliya answers, "Because if we don't help each other we will never move forward."

Small acts of mercy like this pepper the long stretches of carnage depicted in the film. For the most part, personal integrity is lost in the animal savagery of war- Germans, Russians, Poles, Ukrainian partisans- all are reduced to beasts in the name of national patriotism. Even when the war is all but ended, they continue their senseless slaughter.

Wilhelm eventually agrees with his brother, "War brings out the worst in us." The film depicts the corrupting influence of desperation, the limits people will exceed in trying to stay alive.

One character on the eastern front says, in support of urging the troops on, "Do you know what the Russians will do to us if they win?" The photograph of five young faces is folded, torn and mutilated, its individuals corrupted and damaged far beyond anyone's imaginings. The questions raised by *Generation War* seem apt right now not just because of the aging population of Germans with a personal memory of the devastation of WWII, but because of the volatile state of global affairs. The rash of pro-war movies in American theaters is alarming, with trailers promoting soldiering and the honorable camaraderie of war buddies. How soon is history forgotten?

No society is exempt from war crimes. With all bets off as to civilized conduct, wartime provides a green light for institutionalized violence, which often intensifies to needless cruelty. To name a few, we Americans can count the Viet Nam war's My Lai Massacre, the two years of atrocities at Abu Ghraib, or the current rate of rape in the American military which has sky-rocketed with thousands of reports a year. Why do we as informed citizens allow these abuses to continue?

Generation War is an exploration of a specific war as well as an indictment against all wars. The film is a cautionary tale that makes very clear the high cost of political contests played out on the battlefield.