

## New German Historical Perspectives

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*Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

Edited by Sylvia Paletschek

# Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Cultural Meanings, Social Practices

*Edited by  
Sylvia Paletschek*



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## Moving History: Film and the Nazi Past in Germany since the Late 1970s

Frank Bösch

In summer 2007, the German public discussed the film *Valkyrie*, about Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted assassination of Hitler in July 1944. Although filming had only just started, numerous newspapers carried out detailed debates about this piece of popular historiography. An investigative journalist of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* even managed to get access to the screenplay and compared its designated historical facts to academic books and previous films.<sup>1</sup> Famous historians, journalists and relatives of the historical characters explained Stauffenberg's resistance to Hitler and discussed whether a Hollywood production and an actor like Tom Cruise would be adequate for such a theme.

Such debates even before the release of historical films are not uncommon. They prove that audiovisual historiography about the Third Reich is seen as a key element in assuring oneself about historical and national identity. Even in the case of a film which no one has seen yet, the public updates its relation to the historical past and considers the status of filmic representations of the past. Furthermore, nervous debates about new historical films prove the great relevance of collective memory, whose importance is ascribed to popular historiographies.

The relevance of audiovisual popular historiography has increased in the last decades. One might assume that this development was unforeseeable some decades ago, when television was first established. Especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s, historical fiction seemed to lose its significant public role. While movies about the Second World War had their great success in the 1950s (Wegmann 1980), political TV news magazines like *Panorama* were significant for the following decade (Hodenberg 2006: 302–22). They presented history as news – as in the case of the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials – but in public debate the social sciences became more influential than historical arguments. In general, analyses of contemporary questions seemed to replace

popular historiography. However, this trend enjoyed no longevity. Only a decade later, historical movies, series and documentaries began to prosper. In particular, the worldwide success of the American series *Holocaust* in 1978/9 demonstrated the impact which audiovisual forms of popular history could have.

This comeback of audiovisual popular history since the late 1970s is of course not easy to explain. One might interpret it as a result of the growing chronological distance from the Nazi Past and the Second World War, with a declining interest in politics or with the rise of crises which have increased the need for historical identification in a secular age. The rise of conservative governments in the 1980s, which tried to find a new national identity, additionally led to public disputes about contemporary history. One might also argue that history offered a rich source for a mixture of entertainment and education in the media, and in particular in television.

All these reasons might explain why successful popular historiography has mainly focussed on the period of the Third Reich (1933–1945). Guido Knopp's documentaries for the channel *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF), for example, quite often reached about six million viewers and were sold world wide. Their contents have been analysed and criticised by many historians in recent years (Bösch 1999; Keilbach 2002; Loewy 2002; Kansteiner 2003). At the same time, numerous German movies dealing with the Nazi past had great success – for example, *Aimée und Jaguar* (1999), *The Downfall* (2004), *Napola* (2004), *Speer und Er* (2005), *Sophie Scholl* (2005) and *Rosenstraße* (2003). The majority of these films were either ignored or fiercely criticized by German historians. They regarded them as simplified and too emotional, and censured them for mistakes in their historical content.

However, I would like to argue that historians should treat even fictional historical films and TV series in a more scientific way. After all, these movies offer certain modes of historical remembrance which themselves have their own history. The collective acceptance of these historical portraits is negotiated by the public when the audience decides if the product should be noticed or ignored (Kaes 1987: 207). Furthermore, these movies shape the individual remembrance of the past. Many veterans, for example, remember their individual war experience according to the images presented in war movies (Welzer 2002: 178–92). In addition, such movies can be regarded as historical actors, which enhance collective actions in the present (Lagny 1997: 468).

The series *Holocaust*, which was broadcast in 1978/9 in more than fifty countries, is generally seen as a turning point in the discussion of the German past. Especially in Germany the enormous impact of *Holocaust* showed how great the influence of a TV programme on the public and academic conceptions of history could be.<sup>2</sup> Therefore this chapter will take *Holocaust* as a starting point to discuss the changing role of historical representations of National Socialism in fictional films and TV productions. Firstly, I will ask how the depiction of history in movies and TV series has changed since *Holocaust* was originally broadcast. In this regard I will analyse the transformation of the media culture

of remembrance. I will point out three phases since the late 1970s in which the German audiovisual culture of remembrance changed significantly. In order to do so, I will draw on my analyses of about forty German movies and TV series dealing with the Nazi past and public debates about them. Non-German productions will also be considered if they had a great impact on German audiences and debates.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, I will ask how the relationship between academic history and popular historiography in film developed. In doing this, I do not want to examine the historical accuracy of each film or series. For obvious reasons, movies never follow historical sources as exactly as scientific books do. Therefore, it seems to be more productive to compare common elements of those movies to trends of historical research in each decade. Here I would like to argue that though movies do not necessarily draw in depth on the results of historical research they nevertheless refer to contemporary historians' work.

### The Impact of *Holocaust* on Movies and Research in the 1980s

It is well known that the broadcasting of the American docudrama *Holocaust* in 1978/9 led to a great and emotional debate about the past in German society.<sup>4</sup> More than twenty million Germans watched the series, which described how a single Jewish family from Berlin suffered during the Third Reich and participated in all the tragic events of the destruction of the European Jews. But even more important than the great number of viewers was the fact that the majority of viewers discussed the series with friends and colleagues and that tens of thousands of German viewers wrote to the TV channel or tried to call its hotline. It is true that a number of people insulted the channel with anti-Semitic comments. However, more viewers expressed their sympathy and described their personal experience of the Holocaust, and many of these letters were quickly published (see Knilli and Zielinski 1983; for Austria, see Diem 1979: 577). Opinion polls found that anti-Semitic attitudes and sympathies for the Third Reich changed after the broadcast of the docudrama (Bergmann 1997). Another effect of the reception of *Holocaust* was that the German parliament finally abolished the statutory period of limitation concerning murder, after years of postponing a decision about it. This law mainly concerned murder committed during the Third Reich.

The impact of *Holocaust* on historical research is also obvious. The programme actually helped establish this area of research in Germany and in the world and gave a field of historical research its name. Many in the media asked why German historians had failed to research these questions or to inform the public about this period of German history. The news magazine *Der Spiegel*, for instance, gave as its headline 'A Black Day for Historians' (*Ein schwarzer Tag für Historiker*). Famous contemporary historians like Martin Broszat tried to excuse themselves by arguing that the Holocaust had already been well researched in

many studies, but this was not really true. However, the historians admitted that there was an obvious need for other, more popular and emotional forms of imparting knowledge about the Holocaust and the Third Reich to a broader public (Broszat 1979; Scheffler 1979).

How can one explain the enormous impact of this docudrama? On a closer look, one can see that in the year before it was broadcast public discussion about the Holocaust had already increased. On the fortieth anniversary of the *Reichspogromnacht* in 1978 the number of commemoration ceremonies went up significantly (Schmid 2001: 325–93). Public reports about it also increased in 1978 due to the debate about the Nazi past of Hans Filbinger, Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg from 1966 to 1978, and the trial of the staff of the Majdanek concentration camp (Horn 2002). The number of TV programmes about the Holocaust also increased in Germany in 1978. Examples of this are TV productions like *Dr. W. – Ein SS-Arzt in Auschwitz* (1978), *Manager des Terrors* (1977) about Reinhard Heydrich, and *Aus einem deutschen Leben* (1976) about the commandant of Ausschwitz, Rudolf Höß (Wolfgram 2002: 24). Statistical surveys also show an increase in the number of documentaries around 1978 (Kansteiner 2003: 264). Only this general trend can explain why the media reported at such length about *Holocaust*, even before it was broadcasted.

The impact of *Holocaust* was generally welcomed, and it served as a stimulus for new discussions. On the other hand, the content of the series was less accepted. It was widely criticized as too emotional and not authentic enough. However, the content of *Holocaust* influenced the growing number of movies and docudramas about National Socialism in the 1980s. A great deal of *Holocaust's* emotional impact was due to scenes showing the deaths and woes of women and children. This had an effect on the movies of the 1980s. Stories of saved children were the topic of successive films – such as *Regentropfen* (1981), *Stern ohne Himmel* (1981), *Ein Stück Himmel* (1982) and *Hitlerjunge Salomon* (1990). Meanwhile, the life of Anne Frank was portrayed three times in the 1980s and, following *Holocaust*, several movies about Jewish families were produced in Germany. In addition, there were also films which were based on true stories, such as *Die Geschwister Oppermann* (1983) and *Die Bertinis* (1988). Through these and other productions history became emotionally moving.<sup>5</sup> Political and social history was connected to the history of everyday life, and personalized narratives focused attention on the history of the victims, something which had not been developed by historiography at that time.

However, the historical images which were shown in these and other films in the 1980s were not unproblematic. The Jews presented in these movies were, like those in *Holocaust*, mainly rich, assimilated members of the educated middle and upper class. They were often married to Christian Germans and fought for their honour. Other typical elements of Jewish history in Germany were rarely presented: anti-Semitic conflicts before 1933, poverty and Jewish traditions were left out of the German films, even more so than in the American TV series.

Unlike *Holocaust*, German movies rarely showed the Holocaust and the extreme violence which was enacted against the Jews. This was partly due to the fact that the German films mostly concentrated on the early years of Hitler's dictatorship and on the western parts of Germany. Auschwitz and the gas chambers, which were shown in *Holocaust*, remained on the margins of representation in the 1980s. This is similar to the open-air mass shootings that *Holocaust* vividly showed from the perspective of eyewitnesses and with the use of documentary material. Films like the French survival story *Schrei nach Leben* (1985), which showed murders in the ghettos and concentration camps, were condemned as kitschy adventure movies in the German papers.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, one could conclude that *Holocaust* led to a broad public examination of the anti-Jewish culture of the 1930s, but not of the genocide itself.

Unlike their depiction in *Holocaust*, 'Aryan' Germans were presented as faceless followers of the Nazi regime in the German movies of the 1980s but seldom as violent racists. Furthermore, the films quite often showed examples of people offering help to Jews in everyday life. In *Die Geschwister Oppermann*, for example, pupils support a Jewish classmate, while in *Regentropfen* the wife of a lieutenant demonstratively shops in a Jewish store during the April boycott of 1933. And in *Die Bertinis*, the eponymous family finds help in spite of the anti-Semitism around them. Often the authorities show tolerant clemency until they succumb to the pressure of certain National Socialists in a bid to save their own position.

Of course these films showed Nazis who oppressed Jews. However, they were presented as anonymous persons, who had absolute power thanks to being members of the Nazi Party or had personal motives for enriching themselves at the expense of, or avenging themselves against, Jews. Unlike those of the victims, the offenders' biographies were almost irrelevant. Likewise violence against Jews was frequently anonymous, represented by stones thrown at the windows of Jewish families by a nameless mob. The stones and broken windows can be seen as a symbol that more or less replaced the mass killings by a riotous but mostly harmless form of anti-Semitism.

In *Holocaust* there was one character that had an exceptional career as a National Socialist: a lawyer and member of the Schutzstaffel (SS) called Dorf. Unemployment, want of success and his wife's desire for prestige were the central motives for his opportunistic rise in the SS. That career chances were a crucial impetus for the functioning of the Third Reich was also shown in German films like *Lili Marleen* (1981) and in the adaptation of Klaus Mann's novel *Mephisto* (1981). At the same time these German movies offered several moments of relief by showing resistance. Lili Marleen, for instance, secretly helps her Jewish lover and smuggles photos of the extermination camps into Switzerland.

However, the depiction of the Nazis and their beneficiaries produced the most urgent questions in the public debate – which included historians – about the historical accuracy of these films. The series *Väter und Söhne: Eine deutsche*

*Tragödie* (1986), for instance, provoked a debate about whether IG Farben anticipated the availability of forced labourers when they established their factory at Auschwitz, and several academic studies on the company were published in the following years (e.g., Plumpe 1990). Likewise the television play *Die Wannseekonferenz* (1984) started a discussion about how far the extermination of the Jews was decided at the famous meeting after which the programme was named.<sup>7</sup> But while the victimhood of the Jews was accepted in films and public debate, the question of German guilt was still fought over.

At the same time, there was an increase in depictions of opposition to the Nazis from the bottom of German society. In the early 1980s two films were made about the Weiße Rose, the most important student opposition group, whose members paid for their opposition with their lives. The movie *Die weiße Rose* (1982) showed a broad opposition of students and a professor, but the majority of the supporters of the regime were left out. The TV production *Fünf letzte Tage* (1982), about the last days of Sophie Scholl in her detainment, showed several prison officers commiserating with her plight. Furthermore, Klaus Maria Brandauer filmed the solitary Munich assassination attempt of Hitler by Georg Elser (*Georg Elser: Einer aus Deutschland*, 1989).

As well as these heroic examples many German films showed everyday opposition. Various films and TV series were produced in the 1980s which focused on the period from a rural perspective – like the series *Heimat* (1984), *Walters letzter Gang* (1989) and *Herbstmilch* (1988). In these, National Socialism was seen as something that came from outside, from the cities, and which repeatedly rubbed up against the stoicism of rural inhabitants. National Socialism was also portrayed as a phenomenon that somehow lost its importance in everyday life. This is especially true for the series *Heimat*, which understood itself as a direct German counterpart to *Holocaust* (Reitz 1984: 100).

Many of the attributes of German films and TV series from the 1980s mentioned above corresponded to the historical research from these years. After the emphasis on Hitler in the 1970s, films unmistakably joined historiography in a turn toward social history, micro-history and oral history. Media trends and those of historical research seem to have mutually influenced each other. The intensive research of small towns and rural areas during the era of National Socialism also seems to be connected to the movies of the 1980s (Noakes 1996). Just as films did, historical research took a closer look at the everyday resistance which was missed in a focus on great political events. Another parallel can be seen in the fact that the Holocaust was only made a major topic of German historical research from 1982 onwards (Herbert 1998). One can at least assume that increased media coverage of Jewish victims of the Nazis helped to bring about this change in historiography.

Media depiction of resistance to the Nazis also corresponds with the perspectives in academic historical research. Immediately after the movies concerning the Weiße Rose appeared, scientific studies and editions of their letters were published (Iens 1984; Blaha 2003). This is even more the case for the failed

assassination of Hitler by Georg Elser, which had been rarely noticed by historical research. Even books about opposition towards Hitler in the 1990s neglected Elser's well planned attempt to kill the dictator (Fest 1994; Steinbach and Tuchel 1994).

The movies about resistance also show how films can become catalysts of the culture of remembrance. Brandauer's film about Georg Elser, for instance, ended by stating that he was executed at the concentration camp in Dachau, and that no monument of him existed. Consequently, memorials to Elser were erected in different places over the following years. Similarly, the movie *Die Weiße Rose* stated at the end that the judgements against the group had not been subsequently repealed; the German parliament reacted by annulling them in 1985.

### The Critical Turn since the Late 1980s

Since the late 1980s one can see changes in the depiction of National Socialism in films that are part of a new phase in audiovisual history. These later films reconstruct the past much more often from the perspective of the present. Memory culture and the connection between the past and the present became central themes in many recent German films. As early as 1988, *Land der Väter, Land der Söhne* (1988) told the story of a young journalist investigating his father's National Socialist past. A year later, *Abraham's Gold* (1989) showed the conflict between two members of the '68 generation and their fathers and grandfathers about their past. In 1990 the director Michael Verhoeven was honoured for *Das schreckliche Mädchen* (1990), depicting the problems of a young student from Passau investigating the National Socialist past of her hometown. And in the same year the star-studded movie *Rosengarten* (1990) came out, which showed a Jew returning to contemporary Germany to find out more about the history of his sister, who had been killed in the SS child murders in Hamburg in 1945.

These movies ventured beyond the time limit of 1945 and positioned National Socialism in a rather tense relation to the present. The continuity of anti-Semitism and National Socialist values were important elements in these films. The crimes of National Socialism were connected to the process of coming to terms with the past and the acquittals of the jurisdiction of West Germany. This change in perspective again corresponded to shifts in relation to methodical questions as well as shifts in the thematic range of research on National Socialism. The culture of remembrance and the process of coming to terms with the past in general became more central to historical research in these years (Diner 1987; Assmann 1988). Historians also started to interpret National Socialism in relation to the experience of the Federal Republic. The *Historikerstreit* – the great debate among historians about the origins of the Holocaust – particularly underlined the fact that the interpretation of National Socialism was, even among historians, a contested matter and deeply connected to the present.



The historical narratives of films showed significant changes, too. The countryside and the fates of individuals were still central topics in many films. But while in the 1980s the countryside was something of a hideaway from National Socialism, the movies of the 1990s often showed rural victims, offenders and followers together in moments of decision. The anti-Semitic persecution of Jews played an important role here. In *Leni muss fort* (1994), for instance, a Bavarian village decides to let a Jewish foundling, who had been raised by a farmer's family, be taken off. The TV drama *Drei Tage im April* (1995) is set in a small Swabian village in April 1945, shortly before the end of the war. There, three cattle cars of dying Jewish concentration camp prisoners are ignored and denied any help. Instead, the people of the village move the wagon into the next valley to get rid of the problem.

This new focus on the violence in everyday life also matched a new trend of historical research on National Socialism. The earlier assumption of a top-down dissemination of orders was dropped and sociological models of explanation, like group-pressure and regional dynamics, moved to the centre of interest (Browning 1992). It is also noticeable that since the late 1980s the fate of other groups of victims – such as Polish forced labourers and Russian prisoners of war – has been acknowledged, such as in *Der Polenweiber* (1986) and *Das Heimweh des Walerjan Wrobel* (1991). This focus on Eastern European victims of National Socialism can also be found in historical studies. Since the end of the Cold War the crimes committed on Eastern European and Soviet prisoners of war and forced labourers have received more attention in historical research.

In the late 1980s the relationship between cinematic and historical reality changed too. Since 1945 almost all films and series about National Socialism have been related to real historical events. However, they have seldom been claimed to be a direct historical reconstruction. In *Holocaust* this rather tense connection between history and fiction was addressed in the opening credits: 'It is only a story. But it really happened'. The characters were fictional, but they acted in known events. The use of documentary material also proved the historical reality of the Holocaust. However, since the early 1990s there has been a trend toward using historically authentic stories rather than famous historical events with fictional characters. The emotional impact of these movies is due to the fact that they show true stories and reconstruct known fates. In doing so, these films adopt the standards of historians, analysing sources and talking to eyewitnesses.

There are several reasons for the increasing use of historically authentic stories. The films using these are part of a new culture of remembrance. The rise of extreme right-wing parties in Germany has also supported the need for true stories, which can educate the younger generations. Furthermore, TV documentaries about National Socialism since the 1990s, which were shown in increasing numbers, established new expectations to which docudramas and films responded. In general the trend towards reality TV that became evident in the 1990s influenced the watching habits and expectations of film and TV viewers.

This trend toward authenticity was especially evident in *Schindler's List* (1993), which was by far the most influential movie about National Socialism in the 1990s. The famous black and white aesthetics of the movie, the use of the moving camera and the filming of photographic icons enhanced the authentic impression of the movie (Korte 1999; Schulz 2002). The accuracy of its content also led to its positive critical reception among historians.<sup>8</sup> The impression was created that this fictional movie depicted a historical reality that had not yet been captured in the numerous TV documentaries about National Socialism.

The cinematic change of perspective that is marked by *Schindler's List* is again reflected in historical research in the mid 1990s. At this time historians started to look at the Holocaust in terms of regional elites and events in the occupied territories of Poland and Eastern Europe, the latter becoming easier after files from Eastern European archives became available (Aly 1995; Pohl 1996). Not only were the connections between atrocities, enrichment and corruption within these territories analysed by historians but also the smooth transition between profiteers and heroes (Sandkühler 1996).

The public debate about *Schindler's List* made it clear that the depicted crimes were accepted as part of Germany's own past. Conversely, the question of whether a German could be depicted as a rescuer was also discussed.<sup>9</sup> The question concerning guilt had thus shifted. A too-positive depiction of a German during the time of National Socialism now appeared to be problematic. Not only the movie, but also the reception of it in the media created a new way of dealing with the past.

*Schindler's List* also showed how the debate about the representation of the Holocaust changed. Claude Lanzmann, the director of *Shoa* (1985) demanded once again a ban on any film showing the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> This issue stayed at the centre of almost all articles on the feature pages, but Lanzmann's position became more and more opposed. The majority stressed that *Schindler's List* had set a new limit to representation by making the gassing of the Jews a topic without showing it in the movie. Thus *Schindler's List* marked an end to the long discussion of whether or not to show Nazi murders in movies. The directness of *Holocaust* was taken for granted.

The majority of films concerning the Nazi past in the last decade have followed the realistic approach established in the late 1980s and have attempted to tell 'true stories'. But the debate concerning norms of representation of Nazi crimes that surrounded *Schindler's List* was followed by other films that went a step further and presented humorous stories in the context of these otherwise tragic events. Although comedies about the Nazis had a long tradition, Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1997) set new standards.<sup>11</sup> This comedy not only focused on deportation, forced labour and the brutal eviction of a concentration camp, it also contained a clever twist by refusing to reconstruct the Holocaust with an aura of authenticity in the manner of, for example, *Schindler's List*. The story of a father who refuses to tell his son the official version of the Nazis can also be seen as a protest against the official pictures and stories produced by the National Socialists. The refusal of reality becomes a way to survive.



Several other comedies followed in the next few years, like *Der Zug des Lebens* (2000), *Chicken Run* (2000), *Goebbels und Geduldig* (2002) and *Mein Führer* (2006). They were proof of a new easiness in dealing with the Nazi time, which became possible in connection with the serious examinations done in the years before. A humorous way of dealing with dictatorship also became the dominant narrative frame of films about the former German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany), such as *Sonnenallee* (1998), *Helden wie wir* (1999), *Good Bye Lenin* (2003) and *NVA* (2005). These films supported the public view that the GDR was simply a grotesque regime in which protest within everyday life dominated. *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) – the celebrated movie about the Stasi that was awarded an Oscar – is rather an exception here. However, it also takes up the issue of resistance, which is also typical of most of the films about National Socialism.

### Berlin under Fire: Recent Trends

Since the late 1990s, German movies about the Nazi past have become even more numerous and successful. Like the various TV series in the 1980s that were produced as German responses to the success of *Holocaust*, the success of *Schindler's List* and several TV documentaries had a similar effect on the German movie industry. The historical narratives of these more recent films also changed. First of all, if we look at their content we can see that the focus of them shifted from the provincial areas to the big cities. Berlin has become the focus of many films since then, such as *Comedian Harmonists* (1997), *Aimée und Jaguar* (1999), *Rosenstraße* (2003), *The Downfall* (2004) and *Speer und Er* (2005). One could explain this in terms of the Berlin boom that has occurred since the seat of government moved there after German reunification. Other successful films about different periods in German history also take place in Berlin and have shown problems of urban life.<sup>12</sup> In general, the culture of remembrance has started to concentrate on the capital of the 'Berlin Republic', and mixed new symbols of remembrance with new national myths (Kirsch 2003).

The cinematic focus on the capital has led to a different interpretation of the past. National Socialism and the war appear as destroyers of a nostalgically transfigured urban culture (Koepnick 2002: 79). The tension between decadent urban life and danger of death has become a central topic. Although Jewish victims are often central figures in these movies, the depiction of brute violence and concentration camps has somehow disappeared. Instead, the urban inhabitants are shown as victims of bombing raids and dictatorial force. This tendency is also evident in the public debate about the publication of Jörg Friedrich's *Der Brand* (Brand 2002). The Germans have become victims again.

After the dominance of the history of everyday life in the 1980s, these recent movies have concentrated more often on the elite and the persecution of the Jews. If one takes a look at groundbreaking publications on National Socialism

over the last few years similar trends are visible. On the one hand, elites have received more attention since the second half of the 1990s (Herbert 1996; Kershaw 1998–2000; Wildt 2002). On the other hand, there have also been groundbreaking publications about the destructive violence within and on the edge of the Third Reich in the last few years. However, it is obvious that most of the recent important studies of the Holocaust were not written by Germans but by American historians (Friedlaender 2006). Similarly, the majority of recent movies that centred on the topic of the Holocaust were once again non-German or international productions, such as *The Pianist* (2002), about arbitrary force in the Warsaw ghetto; *The Grey Zone* (2001), about Jews forced to work in the crematoria of Auschwitz; and *Fateless* (2005), about everyday life in Auschwitz-Birkenau. An exception here is the German production *Der neunte Tag* (2004), which presented scenes from the Dachau concentration camp. However, this movie focuses on the German resistance and German victimhood once again.

The German movies of the last few years have a number of different themes. The question of individual moral responsibility during the era of National Socialism is one of these. Characters with a lot of potential for identification had to confront temptation and moral dilemmas during the dictatorship. This could be the young boxer at an elite school in *Napola* (2004), the aristocratic wife confronting the Gestapo in *Rosenstraße* (2003), a priest or a student during an interrogation in *Der neunte Tag* (2004) and Sophie Scholl: *Die letzten Tage* (2005), a Nazi housewife in love with a lesbian Jew in *Aimée und Jaguar* (1999), or the secretary in Hitler's bunker in *The Downfall* (2004). Here, the National Socialists are characters without a biography who offer temptations to leading characters. These characters show great resistance in most of the films. The boxer who sets his career aside, the aristocratic wife who demonstrates against the arrest of her husband, the general who contradicts Hitler, and the priest who refuses to cooperate and is sent to a concentration camp – all of these cases create an image of national socialist society that makes exceptional cases a rule. Of course, movies do not have to depict a statistically correct representation of history. But together they leave the impression that current German films offer a generous moral rehabilitation.

Consequently, not only have the settings of movies narrowed but also the time period of many plots. The movies and TV series of the 1980s had shown long-term developments and biographies. More recent films, however, do not discuss why many Germans became National Socialists, and neither do they question how and why they turned into democrats after 1945.

The connection claimed between these later films and historical truth is a close one. The majority of these movies understand themselves as part of a reconstruction of history on the basis of sources. In many cases they make their sources public and claim to be historically accurate, just as historians do. The legitimacy of the representations in *Sophie Scholl*, for example, lies in the use of new files about the examination and trial, the contents of which were accurately

taken into the screenplay.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the producers of *The Downfall* stressed that their film was strictly based on documents and followed the known facts (Fest and Eichinger 2004). Meanwhile, *Speer und Er* was advertised as drawing on new historical results; *The Grey Zone* (2001), *The Pianist* (2002) and *Edelweißpiraten* (2004) utilized reports which were written by the victims right after the war; and *Rosenstraße* and *Aimée und Jaguar* were based on true stories and accounts from witnesses (Wende 2002). In this way, the movies changed their relation to the reality beyond the film. In Niklas Luhmann's terms, the movies claimed to work with the functional criteria of the scientific world (false/true), although they still operated with the major function of the media system (entertaining/boring). Furthermore, the film-makers employed an understanding of historiography which has become a bit old-fashioned among historians: an accurate reproduction of sources should not be taken for a historical interpretation.

These films also mixed fictional and historical material more than before. A number of them show scenes that look like bits of National Socialist newsreels and which were familiar to the audience from documentaries. Scenes from Hitler's last public appearance on 20 April 1945, when he decorated child soldiers (*The Downfall*), Eva Braun's private films on the Obersalzberg (*Speer und Er*) or the famous pictures of the Warsaw ghetto (*The Pianist*) were used as the basis of certain scenes to enhance a film's authenticity. Conversely, the press treated these staged sequences like historical material, and it was sometimes unclear if Hitler himself or the actor Bruno Ganz was shown in the newspaper photographs (Wildt 2002).

Many historians criticized those movies with harsh words in the press. However, the effect of using staged scenes from the past was that historians discussed these films much more often as historical reconstructions than they had done in the 1980s. Movies like *Rosenstraße*, dealing with the protests of German women in 1943, led to a scientific debate about the events in the Rosenstraße, marriages between Jewish and non-Jewish people in Nazi Germany and the possibilities of resistance (Meyer 2004).<sup>14</sup> Many of those movies focused attention on the results of historical research. Historians who were experts on the issues covered in them profited from those movies because their books were recommended together with their expertise. The movies also drew attention to the work of historians and to questions concerning popular history in cinema and TV. The majority of viewers in cinemas were not affected as much by these movies as they had been by *Holocaust* in 1979. But at least these movies increased the interest in contemporary history.

Many of these recent films claim to break taboos about the past, addressing issues which have so far been overlooked by popular and academic history. *The Downfall* and *Speer und Er* in particular were advertised with articles and interviews which claimed that Hitler was for the first time presented as a human being and not as a caricature or within a pedagogic setting. The right-wing press in particular interpreted such movies as a 'sign of emancipation' and the

beginning of a more relaxed way of dealing with the past in Germany.<sup>15</sup> Other movies, which showed Hitler in an even more private context, appeared at the same time. British and German TV showed the melodramatic movie *Uncle Adolf* (2004), which presented Hitler as a charming man, and *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* (2003), which also focused on private elements of his biography like his relation to his niece.

In fact, such movies were not that new. The plot and even several scenes of *The Downfall* (2004) had already been presented in a similar way in *Der letzte Akt* (1955), which also described the last days of Hitler and was also based on witnesses' reports, such as those of Hitler's secretary, Traudl Junge. The popular presentation of Hitler in *The Downfall* was also reminiscent of the way in which his private life and the Nazi elite had been portrayed in many TV documentaries since the 1990s. *The Downfall* showed spectacular pictures of Hitler, ones which were not transmitted by Eva Braun's camera: Hitler showing his emotions, crying, laughing and even marrying. Indeed, the camera moved closer to Hitler's face than ever before. Obviously, the main focus here lies rather on emotionalizing and personalizing aspects than on explanations and background information.

From this perspective, these movies represented a step back from the research which had been done over the past few decades. Although the movies relied much more on historical facts than ever before, they turned away from historical interpretations of the Nazi past. The TV series *Holocaust* was fictional and contained several historical mistakes or implausible elements. However, it had tried to give an interpretation of the Third Reich. In this regard it was more closely connected to academic history than many of the films made nowadays.

## Conclusions

This chapter has focused on two major issues of the treatment of history in feature films and TV productions since the late 1970s. Firstly, it looked at how audiovisual representations of the National Socialist period have changed since the late 1970s. The analysis has revealed some significant developments. First of all it is clear that the success of the American TV series *Holocaust* had a major influence on German movies and TV series in the 1980s. Although the content of the series was criticized in many aspects, numerous German productions have used similar narratives. This example shows how the worldwide media industry invented transnational popular historiographies. However, one should not speak of a simple transfer of American interpretations. Furthermore, German productions changed the narrative of harried families, put them in different settings and constructed different popular historiographies. They left out stories about those responsible for the crimes and scenes in the extermination camps of Eastern Europe. Instead, the resistance of famous persons or ordinary people in rural areas was presented.

These narratives changed at the end of the 1980s. Since then, many feature films have claimed authenticity and connected their stories to the present. The innocence of rural life was transformed into a sphere where collective guilt was crucial. Compared to earlier decades, movies made since the late 1980s have started to discuss the Nazi past critically. Since the late 1990s, another turning point has become obvious. Movies have tended to concentrate on major cities in which German protagonists have had to face temptations and moral dilemmas. As in the movies of the early Cold War, the protagonists manage to resist these offers. Although these later films are historically more accurate than before, they also avoid broader historical interpretations. To sum up, the development from the late 1970s to the present constitutes a change from long-term historical developments to condensed situations of decision; from the fates of Jewish families to the tribulations of German urban citizens; and from fictional stories with moral issues to the depiction of a historical truth.

The second issue this chapter has discussed is the development of the relationship between academic history and popular historiography in feature films. The analysis shows that historical research and film are more closely connected to each other than seems to be the case at first sight. While historians may criticize the historical content of films, historians and films often share the same perspective on National Socialism. Just as films and TV series did in the 1980s, scholars exploring National Socialism at the time preferred social and micro-historical approaches and analysed the regions. A change of focus to resistance in everyday life came about in the 1990s, when the mass murder of different groups of victims moved to the centre. In recent years, the renaissance of biographical studies and the academic interest in urban life can be seen to have parallels in the content of recent movies.

As the perspectives of film and textual historiography greatly overlap, one can assume a mutual influence. The chicken-and-egg question can hardly be answered. However, it is clear that historical research is not necessarily providing the impulse for popular history. In this respect, one should reconsider the term 'popularization' because it is always based on the assumption that scientific truths are first produced by researchers and then simplified by the media. Instead, the approaches of feature films and historiography often go hand in hand.

This chapter has also analysed the content of films, public debates about them and their relationship with the contemporary historiography. What we do not know precisely is how cinema audiences and television viewers reacted to these films and how they shaped their ideas about the past. Therefore one should be careful when speaking of certain forms of collective memory just because certain types of films have had great success. The reception of those films depends not only on the content of the film and the public debate about it, but also on the individual cultural background of viewers. Although popular historiographies are less sophisticated than academic books, films might offer very different ideas of the past. While academic history tries to find clear but

differentiated answers, films are always more ambiguous. Consequently, films like *Valkyrie* might be seen as an act of patriotic resistance, as a disloyal breach of military obedience or as a general justification of assassinations. Finally, neither historians nor journalists decide how such films are understood; rather, interpretation is in the hands of the audience.

## Notes

1. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9 August 2007.
2. See the articles on the impact of *Holocaust* in the journal *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 30(2005): 4–154.
3. For a more detailed version of the arguments in this chapter and a broader view of the research project of which it is a part, see Bösch (2007).
4. See Märthesheimer and Frenzel (1979).
5. For movies up to the 1980s, see esp. Insdorf (1989).
6. E.g., *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 November 1986; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 November 1986.
7. See *Der Spiegel*, 17 December 1984; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 December 1984; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 December 1984.
8. See Loewy (1995), Wildt (1995) and Eley and Grossmann (1997).
9. See Weiss (1995).
10. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 March 1994.
11. Benigni's film may be better known to readers by its English title: *Life is Beautiful*. On Benigni's film, see Bleicher (2002) and Fröhlich and Loewy (2003).
12. It is remarkable that many of these contemporary films deal with the problems of the younger generations living in Berlin. Compare, e.g., *Sonnenallee* (1998), *Lola rennt* (1998), *Good Bye Lenin* (2003), *Herr Lehmann* (2003), *Die fetten Jahre sind vorbei* (2004) and *Was nützt die Liebe in Gedanken* (2004).
13. *Die Welt*, 24 February 2005.
14. Essays by historians about the film *Rosenstraße* can be found on a 2004 discussion forum at: [http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Rosenstrasse/Rosenstrasse\\_index.htm](http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Rosenstrasse/Rosenstrasse_index.htm). Retrieved 20 July 2008.
15. *Die Welt* 12 August 2004; see also Ian Kershaw in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 September 2004.