

## The *Mitläufer* in Two German Postwar Films

### *Representation and Critical Reception*

ULRIKE WECKEL

During the early postwar period, few German feature films dealt explicitly with the National Socialist past and its aftereffects. As in other eras, filmmakers responded to the audience's wish for entertainment. Some directors and screenwriters in both the East and the West did feel that the disturbing present, even if not the recent past, should not be ignored completely, and several films of the late 1940s were set in destroyed German cities.<sup>1</sup> But as these so-called "rubble films" tended to focus on devastation and the difficulties of reconstruction, even this serious genre addressed everyday life during the Nazi dictatorship with its persecutions, war crimes and genocide only indirectly or in passing. Therefore most films did not confront German viewers with unsettling analyses of their behavior between 1933 and 1945.<sup>2</sup> However, Wolfgang Staudte's early postwar films were exceptions to this trend. This director obviously wanted to understand the complete moral collapse of "respectable" civil society that followed the Nazis' seizure of power. He was particularly interested in the less spectacular forms of complicity such as opportunism, cowardice, vanity, careerism, unscrupulousness and the simple lack of courage to stand up for one's beliefs. Western occupation forces labeled participants in these forms of collaboration with the Third Reich *Mitläufer*, i.e. persons who "followed along." The *Mitläufer* constituted the fourth category in their

denazification procedure, nestled between the “lesser offenders” and the “exonerated.” While morally unflattering, the label *Mitläufer* implied no juridical consequences.<sup>3</sup>

Staudte placed *Mitläufer* at the center of two of his films: *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*) from 1946 and *Rotation* from 1948–49. In each film, the protagonist is apolitical and in no way supports the Nazi Party; indeed, he privately opposes the regime and the war. Nonetheless, both men are complicit: one as an officer on the Eastern Front, and the other as an employee of the press that prints the main Nazi newspaper. Each fails to intervene in crimes that he witnesses, and even when one of them eventually makes up his mind to support the resistance, he acts too late and all too ineptly. So, neither character is a hero, at least not in the beginning. Each must face the evil consequences of his complicity and go through a process of reformation until he can find redemption.

In this article, I want to pursue the question of how Staudte conceived of his two characters, how the films represent them, and how German audiences understood them. I will explain Staudte’s interest in the *Mitläufer* and summarize their development over the course of each film, but my main interest is to examine the ways in which contemporary audiences perceived both figures. “Following along” with the seemingly omnipresent and all-powerful Nazi regime had been a widespread attitude in Germany. It was not only easier and safer, it offered several advantages. After the war had been lost, many Germans were annoyed by the questionnaires the Allies forced them to fill out and by which they were put into denazification categories and then either punished or allowed to keep apartment, job and property. In this procedure, it might have been a relief to be labeled a *Mitläufer*. Still the way the occupation powers morally evaluated *Mitläufer* must have been obvious to everybody. How, then, would Germans respond when one of their countrymen confronted them, while sitting in a movie theater, with the shameful behavior in which a majority of them had indulged?

Most cultural historians will readily agree that in addition to studying cultural representations *per se*, their contexts and their authors’ intentions it also makes sense to look at the perceptions of audiences—who are the viewers, listeners, readers of certain works and how they understand and evaluate what is presented to them. Every cultural representation is ambiguous and needs recipients to give it particular meaning, and as a

result, individual readings vary depending on the reader's historical situation, interests, experiences with a genre, and so on. Cultural history would therefore miss half the subject if it failed to examine the reception process.

Just as quickly, though, doubts arise about how this can be done in a useful way. There seems to be a severe lack of sources. The first difficulty is estimating the size of anonymous mass audiences. In the case of films, it is very hard to find precise data on where a certain film was shown, how many times and to how many viewers. For early German postwar films we have hardly any figures at all. Instead, social historians have sought to establish the number of movie theaters that reopened in destroyed cities; when they opened; whether they could be reached by public transportation; the cost of tickets; and the social class, education, age and gender of regular filmgoers. One could try to supplement these basic social data by searching, for example, for advertisements of specific films in the local press. Still, the quantitative approach does not seem to reach very far, for quantitative data do not answer the qualitative questions I want to ask. For example, even precise box office figures do not reveal how much viewers liked a film, not to mention how they read it. Such data tell us more about theater owners' scheduling decisions and the effects of advertising.

In looking for qualitative material on a film we are primarily left with the writings of professional critics published in the press. Very occasionally we also find letters to directors or actors and actresses that not only express a fan's admiration for some star but comment on the writer's viewing experience. And, if only by chance, one might find mention of such experiences in memoirs or diaries. Still, the richest source is film reviews.<sup>4</sup> And this is where most historians' problems start. Can we take critics as representatives of the entire audience? Critics are not average filmgoers; they are usually journalists who see many films, and during the postwar period they were almost always men. Before seeing a film, they will read preparatory press material (if they see the film at all—some reviewers just paraphrase press material). And they seek to present themselves to their readers, and especially to their colleagues, as connoisseurs of art. Nevertheless, very few reviewers are really *cinéastes*. In the daily routine of newspapers, even amateurs write film reviews. Therefore critics do not always see and comment on films differently than laypeople. Indeed some fans might know much more about a film than

the reviewer who happens to report on it. On closer inspection then, the border between self-appointed experts and those they often disparage as the “broad audience” (*breites Publikum*) is artificial, primarily serving critics’ needs for distinction. Moreover the search for “representative voices” strikes me as a step in the wrong direction. Since cultural representations can be read in many different ways, how are we to decide which of these is representative? I would argue that rather than being concerned with this question, we should look more closely at the rich spectrum of readings. On the one hand, this allows us to see which interpretations were articulated more frequently and thus determine, in retrospect, which were mainstream. On the other hand, we can gain an insight into the conditions in which mainstreams form (or do not) and when differing views flourish (or do not).

Therefore I plead that we not rashly neglect reviews as sources but take the trouble to collect a broad range of them (and not only the oft-cited voices of famous critics). The enormous variety of critical opinion on any film provides a rich basis for conjecture on how and why different viewers arrived at their respective judgments. In this way, we can compare examples of individual reception in order to determine how each viewer arrived at his or her specific assessment. In particular, the mistakes, significant omissions and arbitrary narrative completions that we find in the plot summaries of different critics can help us locate their expectations and prejudices. We can also see how commonly these were shared. So, starting with individual critics and their active, even wayward, interpretations puts us in a position to examine the particular conditions that repeatedly steered individuals’ viewings into the same channels and therefore to understand why certain readings were more widespread than others.

In fact, we have an even greater basis for comparison than at first appears because films that had repeated openings in theaters or were later broadcast on television were reviewed several times. In addition, postwar feature films were often shown in all of Germany’s occupation zones and later in both German states. By looking at reviews from different historical and political contexts side by side, we can reconstruct the *Zeitgeist* of different periods and see in which ways the political situation influenced published opinion.

In what follows, I will first provide some biographical background on Wolfgang Staudte, since the director himself cited his personal experience as the source of his preoccupation with the *Mitläufer*. I will then summarize the plots of *The Murderers Are among Us* and *Rotation*, focusing on their *Mitläufer* characters. Third, I will examine how contemporary film reviewers interpreted these characters. Finally, I will discuss what this case study reveals about the ways in which the Nazi past was understood in postwar Germany and also about the process of reception in general.

#### WOLFGANG STAUDTE: A MITLÄUFER FROM 1933 TO 1945

As a 26-year-old actor working in leftist-socialist theater troupes, Wolfgang Staudte was not fond of the Nazis. He was apparently banned from the stage when they took power, but he joined the *Reichsfilmkammer* (the Film Guild of Nazi Germany) in September 1933 and was thereby able to work in the film industry. Through the experience he acquired making commercials, Staudte became skilled in dense short plots and original dialogue as well as punchy shots and editing. Later discovered by the production company Tobis (a branch of Ufa, the Nazi “Hollywood”),<sup>5</sup> Staudte made four full-length features during the war. Despite the political function of even nonpolitical films in wartime, I do not think we can say that Staudte played up to the Nazis in any way with the films he directed. But he did act in minor roles in some unmistakably propagandistic and anti-Semitic films such as *Pour le Mérite* (1938), *Jud Süß* (1940), and *... reitet für Deutschland* (1940/41).<sup>6</sup>

One could argue that this made him an accomplice. Staudte’s own explanation of his work as a director and an actor during the National Socialist period was that he would have done anything to retain his military exemption and avoid being sent to the front.<sup>7</sup> My point here is not to make easy judgments after the fact regarding Staudte’s survival strategy. Rather, I want to stress that his own experience as a *Mitläufer*—as someone who made his own compromises during the years of dictatorship and mass murder—inspired his placement of bystander figures at the center of several of his early postwar films. Of course, the *Mitläufer* experience was very common at that time in Germany. This raises questions about whether

Staudte's audience also identified with his protagonists, and if so, what they perceived and acknowledged in their viewings of these protagonists and what they ignored or overlooked. This subject will be explored after an overview of the two *Mitläufer* dramas.

HANS MERTENS IN *THE MURDERERS ARE AMONG US*

*Die Mörder sind unter uns*, which premiered in mid-October 1946, tells of the gradual transformation of the ex-military officer and returnee Hans Mertens. The film opens with Mertens wandering among the ruins of postwar Berlin, demoralized, asocial and addicted to alcohol. But soon the young graphic artist Susanne Wallner enters his life. Recently liberated from a concentration camp, she restores both herself and Mertens to something like a normal middle-class life with remarkable speed.<sup>8</sup> Yet Mertens, an ambitious surgeon before the war, remains traumatized by his war experiences and incapable of work. He looks for distraction among the dancers in a cabaret and responds to Susanne's care with insults and cynicism. Toward the end of the film, viewers learn through a flashback that Mertens had witnessed the mass shooting of over one hundred Polish civilians—men, women and children—which had taken place on Christmas Eve, 1942, while Mertens was stationed in Poland. When his superior, Captain Ferdinand Brückner, had first ordered the execution, Mertens had protested pleading that, since it was Christmas, at least the women and children should be spared. But Mertens had failed to move Brückner. Invoking the same holiday, he had patronizingly sent the defiant Mertens off to find material for a star for the company Christmas tree that Brückner had just been trimming. And Mertens had obeyed the "order" (figure 1). As machine guns rattle in the background, the camera closes in on Mertens's hand crumpling a metal plate cut in the shape of a star and dropping it in the snow.

After Germany's unconditional surrender and Mertens's return to Berlin, he learns that Brückner, whom he thought had died in the war, has established a successful business—turning steel helmets into pots and pans. Horrified by Brückner's lack of awareness of any wrongdoing as he fattens himself in the postwar reconstruction boom, Mertens decides that he must make Brückner atone for his crime.

In Staudte's first draft of the screenplay, Mertens shoots Brückner while he is delivering an ingratiatingly sentimental speech to his employees on the first Christmas after the war. The film was to end with the following sequence: a courtroom scene in which the prosecutor praises the trivial petit bourgeois virtues of the murder victim, a flashback to the war crime as Mertens saw it, and the recessing of the jury to consider their verdict.<sup>9</sup> With this ending, Staudte clearly hoped to encourage the members of his audience to make their own judgments about such individual acts of retribution. But the Soviet cultural officer, who unlike his American, British and French colleagues supported this first postwar German film project, feared that the murder of a war criminal on the screen might inspire similar crimes in the streets. He thus ordered Staudte to change the script so that Mertens comes to renounce vigilante justice and turns the retired captain over to the authorities.<sup>10</sup> Since internal transformation offers little dramaturgical impact, Staudte had Mertens's girlfriend Susanne Wallner, who suspects her lover's murderous plan, suddenly break in on the dramatic and shadowy showdown between Mertens and Brückner. As Mertens takes aim with his gun and demands that his former superior answer for himself, and Brückner pathetically pleads his innocence, Susanne shouts Mertens's name. Mertens immediately abandons his self-appointed task of avenging Brückner's crime, walks over to Susanne, embraces her in relief and thanks her. "Hans," she tells him, "we don't have the right to judge." And Mertens, already convinced, adds: "No, Susanne, but we have the duty to indict and to demand justice in the name of the millions of innocent people who were murdered."<sup>11</sup> Cinematic imagery alone then pronounces judgment on Brückner: dark shadows close in around his head, the war criminal clings to his factory gate as its bars become those of a small window set in a prison wall, and against Mertens's off-screen voice translucent images drift across the screen—a widow with children, crippled soldiers, an expansive war cemetery. The camera then swoops over and through seemingly endless rows of snow-covered crosses, slows briefly as three rise up to form a contemporary Calvary, and then finally closes in on the darkness at the center of one of the crosses.

It is only with the conclusion of the showdown scene that the *Mitläufer* Mertens achieves redemption. As a sign of this, the film confers on him the authority of a citizen prosecutor accusing Brückner and demanding justice in the name of the victims. Over the course of the film,



Fig. 1. Mertens protests against the massacre; Mertens accepts the order to bring a star for the Christmas tree. Courtesy of DEFA-Stiftung, Berlin, and Icestorm Entertainment.

then, Mertens grows from a brutal, egocentric cynic to a healthy citizen who resurrects his career as a doctor—someone who saves rather than takes lives—builds a romantic relationship and resists his urge for vengeance. Like Susanne Wallner, viewers are supposed to feel sympathy for this emotionally crippled war veteran and perhaps even understand his wrathful plans for murder, but ultimately they are not to approve of such intentions. Rather, they are supposed to see Mertens's wish to murder Brückner years after the fact not as noble but as self-serving. Brückner's death would have served a purpose on Christmas Eve in 1942, since it might have saved the lives of the Polish captives. But at that time, Mertens



lacked the courage for outright mutiny. After the war, he suffered not only from what he had seen but also from his having merely stood by. So, murdering Brückner years after the crime would have served primarily to appease Mertens's own bad conscience.

#### HANS BEHNKE IN *ROTATION*

In *Rotation*, which Staudte wrote and filmed two years later, the case of the *Mitläufer* is completely different. From the beginning, Hans Behnke is a much more likable character than Hans Mertens. The film sympathetically follows his life in episodes over a span of nearly twenty years.<sup>12</sup> It starts with Behnke falling in love, marrying and then becoming a father as one of the many unemployed during the late Weimar Republic. Behnke eventually finds work operating the rotary press for the National Socialist newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*. At his job in one of the party's leading companies, he regularly rubs shoulders with Nazis; at the same time, however, the Security Service keeps an eye on him because of his antifascist brother-in-law, who went underground shortly after the Nazis came to power. In contrast to *The Murderers Are among Us*, the props of National Socialist theatricality are omnipresent in *Rotation*: uniforms, leather overcoats, party badges and medals, flags, swastikas, and photographs of Nazi bigwigs on the walls. In order to keep the job he was finally able to get, Behnke reluctantly joins the Nazi Party. The viewer recognizes this by the shiny pin on his lapel and the portrait of Hitler on the Behnkes' living room wall, placed there after a party official had once commented on its absence (figure 2).

Despite his modest prosperity, Hans Behnke remains distant from the regime. He is troubled to see his friendly Jewish neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Salomon, deported and is also disturbed as he watches his son Helmuth become a fanatic Nazi in the Hitler Youth. And this son—once the joy of his newly wedded parents but now eager to do his duty for the new state—comes to denounce his father. This happens as a consequence of Hans's eventual involvement with the resistance. His antifascist brother-in-law returns from exile and during the bombing of Berlin tries to persuade Behnke to repair a defective printing press for his resistance group. After considerable hesitation, Behnke gives in, though seemingly more to help



Fig. 2. The personnel manager at the *Völkischer Beobachter* pressures Behnke to join the Nazi Party; and the portrait of Hitler in the Behnkes' living room. Courtesy of DEFA-Stiftung, Berlin, and Icestorm Entertainment.

Kurt than out of political conviction. Helmuth then finds an antiwar flyer from the repaired press on his parents' bookshelf, and he becomes desperately confused. Not long thereafter, he is shocked by the sight of his father throwing an ashtray at the portrait of Hitler—an outburst prompted by Hans's fury at the arrest and murder of his brother-in-law. Helmuth resigns himself to the conviction that he must fight sedition on the home front regardless of the personal cost and betrays his father to his youth group leader.<sup>13</sup> Thrown into prison, Behnke is about to be executed when, in the nick of time, the Red Army arrives and frees the inmates. Viewers know that Behnke's joy will prove bittersweet, since in an earlier scene they saw his wife Lotte killed in the battle of Berlin. But rather than wallow in family tragedy, Staudte concludes his *Mitläufer* drama with an optimistic turn. Helmuth, who had since witnessed his admired youth leader's cowardly opportunism, comes to his senses during his time as a prisoner of war. At the urging of his girlfriend he dares to face his father again. For his part, Behnke has recognized his own responsibility for having never challenged the Hitler Youth propaganda to which his son had been subjected. Behnke not only accepts Helmuth's apology, but he asks for forgiveness on behalf of his entire generation—those adults who stood by and did nothing.<sup>14</sup> Together, these two converts to antifascism promise to see to it that such things never happen again.

Although this story of the “common man” and its moral accorded with the political program of those responsible for cultural policy in the Soviet occupation zone, there were nonetheless conflicts over some of the film's details. First, the Soviets forbade the use of scenes from Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* in which various national athletic teams march into the Berlin Olympic Stadium in 1936. Staudte wanted to include this footage in order to demonstrate that foreign participation in the Games had dispelled doubts about the Nazis' ascent to power that had remained within German society. Although the Soviets had boycotted the Berlin Olympics, and therefore had not taken part in this international approval of the regime, Soviet censors objected to the use of such footage by a German director since its narrative function was to provide an excuse for his people's acceptance of the Nazi regime.<sup>15</sup>

Staudte was more irritated by the demand of the East German state-owned production company DEFA that he cut a shot from the end of the film in which father and son burn Helmuth's uniform in the fireplace. In

order to make his son look the part of a civilian, Behnke has just given the young man one of his own few suits. The following dialogue was intended to accompany the scene: Son (proudly): “Hey Father, this is the first suit I’ve ever had.” Father: “And that is the last uniform you’ll ever have.”<sup>16</sup> However East Germany—despite the popular slogan “Never again war!”—sharply distinguished the uniforms of friends from those of enemies, and the global pacifism expressed in these lines did not accord with the line of the GDR’s Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1948. Vehement arguments ensued, though Staudte finally gave in and released the edited version in order to ensure that the film would be seen at all.<sup>17</sup> But he did not show up for the premiere in September 1949; and he resigned from DEFA.<sup>18</sup> (That resignation, unlike his later one, turned out to be short-lived.) Staudte had also struck a compromise that permitted distribution of the unedited version in West Germany. Ironically the Federal Republic banned the importation and commercial screening of the film because of the Cold War, and after this ban was lifted in 1957, it seems that nobody remembered to reinsert the missing shot.

#### RECEPTION OF THE *MITLÄUFER*

Staudte, in retrospect, once called *The Murderers Are among Us* an indictment and *Rotation* a defense of the *Mitläufer*.<sup>19</sup> Of course, not even a director’s commentary is the last word in such matters. Cultural representations always require interpretation, and multiple interpretations are always possible. Nevertheless Staudte’s intentions are fairly evident in the two films, and it is therefore remarkable that contemporary critics hardly ever read them in these ways. Why didn’t they?

In the Fall of 1946—just fourteen days before the premiere of *The Murderers Are among Us*—verdicts were announced in Nuremberg against the 22 “major war criminals,” and almost all of the defendants showed as little sense of their own guilt as Brückner had in the film’s final scene. To be sure, Germans were at first unanimous in their reservations about the trial, presuming that a “victor’s sense of justice” would prevail. By the end of the trial, however, many Germans wanted to see this “bunch of criminals” hanged for what they had brought upon the allegedly innocent German people.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, none of the critics played Brückner’s crime

down; they all agreed that he deserved punishment. It seems then that viewers were so preoccupied with Brückner's scandalous refusal to acknowledge his guilt that they hardly noticed the ambivalence of the Mertens character. On the contrary, for them Mertens symbolized the typical German who had been deceived and who had suffered. Indeed, the film does present Mertens as, among other things, a victim of the war.<sup>21</sup> And if it had occurred to anyone that his behavior during the war deserved some blame, the film suggests that his profound trauma and his initial homelessness provided "sufficient punishment."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, his sensitivity and his sense of justice seem to be proved by the heartfelt anguish that witnessing the war crime causes him and by his insistence on holding Brückner accountable. In addition, the "good guy/bad guy" dichotomy of the suspense genre may have contributed to ennobling Mertens in contrast to Brückner. In a review of the film in the Social Democratic journal *Vorwärts*, for example, Mertens was called a "German officer who remained humane" and a figure who embodied "a tragic postwar fate."<sup>23</sup> The word "tragic" implies inevitability, and indeed most critics, many of whom were probably veterans themselves, identified with Mertens's position and perceived his helplessness and passivity while under the command of a military superior as inescapable.<sup>24</sup> When the flashback scene received mention at all, it was invariably described as a mass execution that Mertens "had to" witness and could not possibly have prevented.<sup>25</sup>

I do not mean to understate the risk for the soldier who rebels against a criminal commander. But I want to stress that in this film—unlike in *Rotation* two years later—Staudte made no attempt to represent courageous resistance to Nazi crimes. On the contrary, Mertens's fruitless protest, his ensuing compliance with Brückner's "order" to get a star for the Christmas tree, and the telling image of Mertens crumpling the star in his fist while watching the massacre all make him appear pathetic.<sup>26</sup> But this was lost on contemporary German critics. For them, what mattered was that Mertens dared to confront his superior, not the fact that he quickly resigned himself to Brückner's actions. The reviewer for *Aufbau* found Mertens's short-lived revolt so atypical, and so brave, that he could hardly understand the emotional and moral crisis suffered by this character:

Wherein lies the guilt of this hero? One cannot identify with someone else's guilt (*mit fremder Schuld*) if one does not share in it. We all

have our share in this guilt, but the film does not demonstrate the fault of this hero who did everything to prevent inhumanity.<sup>27</sup>

Convinced that Mertens's cautious questioning of the brutal reprisal and his polite request to exempt women and children were already "everything" that could have been done in such a situation, this critic raised Mertens above all of the soldiers who had never even protested against war crimes.

Most of his colleagues preferred to generalize Mertens's traumatic experience of powerlessness to the entire people: if Mertens was a victim of war, then so were most Germans.<sup>28</sup> Presented with this uprooted figure, such critics both pitied and identified with him—a combination made especially easy by the self-pity that many commentators found to be so typical in this era. At the same time, it is often unclear in precisely which way they identified with Mertens: as one forced to witness or even commit atrocities (which only very few would have publicly admitted at that time), as one who had misspent his youth and health in a fruitless enterprise, or merely as one who had not been led to victory. Both the tendency to generalize and this ambiguity in identification are particularly apparent in a 1948 entry in *Filmdienst der Jugend*, a Catholic pedagogical film guide. From the very first sentence, the reviewer appropriated the film to his agenda by summarizing it as an expression of the collective desire of a "disillusioned war generation" to confront "our stony military superiors" now that all were civilians.<sup>29</sup> And he left open just what had disillusioned the young participants. The reviewer did seem to assume that Mertens bore some sort of responsibility, yet he skipped over the redemption that Mertens achieves over the course of the film only to replace it with the redemption of the sympathetic audience: "The only important thing is that, in the spirit of the Christian *mea culpa*, we all feel our co-responsibility in the guilt of the others (*dass wir uns mitschuldig fühlen an der fremden Schuld*)."<sup>30</sup> Notice how his sentence distinguishes "we" from the anonymous guilty "others." This Catholic critic then sidestepped the troublesome question of whether Brückner alone bore guilt or whether Mertens, and all other bystanders, collectively shared responsibility, taking up theology instead. He explicitly called on Germans to *assume*, like Jesus, the guilt of others, and he thereby implicitly suggested that their position paralleled Jesus's innocence. Along these same lines, another film review from 1946 in the *Berliner Zeitung* attributed a cathartic effect to the film

and also gave it the function of a litmus test: “A good German can be recognized by whether—as well as by how—he is gripped by this film.”<sup>31</sup> A sympathetic response to Mertens’s anguish and maturation thus certified the viewer as “a good German.”

The language of the early film reviews is vague and crammed with metaphors, but as with the expression “fremde Schuld”—someone else’s guilt, a stranger’s guilt, a guilt strange or alien to us—that occurs twice in the above quotations, the way in which guilt is addressed is particularly confused. Their phrasings usually leave open exactly who bears guilt and for what.<sup>32</sup> While the case seemed clear for those who gave orders, the idea that those who obeyed orders might reproach themselves for their acquiescence in what they knew to be crimes was latent, at best, in 1946. Only one reviewer departed from this unanimously uncritical response to Mertens—Wolfdietrich Schnurre, a writer who would mercilessly castigate moral failure in his later short stories and novels. Because Schnurre took Mertens to be guilty, he was not at all convinced that the film’s hero achieved genuine moral insight just by renouncing his desire to kill Brückner. Identifying with the protagonist no less than did Mertens’s apologists, Schnurre—a twenty-five-year-old war veteran—asked in the first person, provokingly: “The murderers are among us? Who are the murderers? Weren’t we all, those of us who carried arms?” He then answered in the affirmative:

Dr. Mertens, who in the film twice wanted to set himself up as the executioner of justice, is also a murderer. After all, he allowed the blood bath on Christmas Eve to occur. He clicked his heels when he saw that his protest had no effect. He did what we all did: he capitulated to authority. He shrugged his shoulders and let defenseless women and children be murdered without having even attempted to rescue them. And it is, of all people, this guilty-yet-“innocent” average German who is put before us as the rehabilitated hero of this story.<sup>33</sup>

In the following decades, criticism of Mertens’s ultimate obedience surfaced occasionally, but it became more disinterested and no longer adopted the pose of an angry young man who includes himself in his accusations. In 1960, Theodor Kotulla—one of the pioneers of genuine

film criticism in the Federal Republic, which pursued a sociopolitical approach—took a position close to that of Schnurre. But Kotulla, unlike Schnurre, recognized that the film itself portrayed Mertens's guilt, that the character's behavior demonstrated that he knew himself to be guilty.<sup>34</sup> But even this late, such interpretations remained the exception and contrasted sharply with those of West German educators, jurists, priests and psychologists who continued to miss the problematic nature of the *Mitläufer*. Because they did not think that Mertens should have acted differently, they diagnosed his guilt feelings and desire for revenge as pathological. Since they doubted that young students could understand such mental derangement, they debated the film's age-appropriateness and pedagogical value.<sup>35</sup>

It appears then that increased distance from the Nazi period did not generally allow viewers to develop a sharper eye for the *Mitläufer* and his potential inner conflicts. The range of readings of the film's flashback scene—as a brave attempt at resistance, as an illustration of the institutional helplessness of military subordinates or as a portrayal of convenient or even cowardly compliance with authority—tells less about the film and more about the experiences and desires of the critics. Not even the enormous changes in the political climate that occurred over the course of fifteen years produced much in the way of new attitudes toward the film.

All this changed dramatically with the reception of *Rotation*. As I mentioned earlier, Staudte explicitly saw both Mertens and Behnke, the main character of *Rotation*, as *Mitläufer*. He apparently shared the view of the occupation powers that “following along” during Nazi dictatorship was blameworthy even if not legally punishable, for in *The Murderers Are among Us* he meant to indict the *Mitläufer*. Two years later, though, in *Rotation*, he wanted to defend the same figure. Since critics seldom identified the initially unpleasant Hans Mertens as a *Mitläufer*, one wonders how they responded to the much more positive depiction of Behnke.

Like Mertens, Behnke fails to intervene against what he knows to be evil—and he does so over many years. He prints the Nazi paper *Völkischer Beobachter*—the camera captures its propagandistic headlines several times—but without enthusiasm, in order to feed his family. Later he joins the Nazi Party, albeit under pressure. So far, Behnke seems to have good reasons for his behavior. Then his Jewish neighbors are gathered up by



the SS and taken off in a truck, and while it is true that he looks on with concern, he nevertheless shuts the window and draws the curtains—a scene whose symbolism is as striking as that of Mertens’s crushing of the Christmas star (figure 3).

If not before, then now the viewer can see the problem with “following along.” So, Staudte soon has Behnke change his attitude, and by the end he is helping the antifascists. In *Rotation*, then, what began as a realistic representation of the life of an average German takes a turn toward the ideal. Rather than leave the message of his morality play (*Lehrstück*) implicit, for the audience to uncover, Staudte explicitly maps it out.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, since the protagonist had realized for himself and announced to the audience that it was impossible to remain apolitical, his own insight prevented audiences from even identifying him as a *Mitläufer*. Both the political left and the right missed the point, though each for their own reasons. The press in the Soviet occupation zone and later in the GDR either focused on Behnke’s turn toward resistance or went so far as to make him into a *bona fide* resistance fighter. Leftist newspapers in both East and West Germany simply debated whether Behnke’s decision to risk his life for the resistance group was historically typical.<sup>37</sup> In response to press viewings of *Rotation* in 1949, critics in liberal-bourgeois and conservative West German newspapers paid just as little attention to Behnke’s long years of acquiescence to Nazi rule as had the East German press before them; though these Western critics were not distracted by Behnke’s later conversion, they were simply unimpressed by the mundane character of his conformity. Apparently no one recognized what was problematic about such behavior. For example, Behnke’s symbolic closing of the curtains was mentioned only many years after the premiere, and even then only occasionally.<sup>38</sup> And Behnke’s apology to his son in the father–son reconciliation scene was apparently so hard to grasp that most critics simply skipped over this sentence. It seems that *Rotation* aroused even less probing of conscience about the extent to which one had contributed to the functioning of the Nazi dictatorship than did *The Murderers Are among Us*.

While the *Mitläufer* character was not the object of criticism in West Germany, the film and its director certainly were. By 1948–49, the Cold War had reached its first peak, and many believed that a DEFA film could



Fig. 3. Telling images of resignation: Mertens crushes the Christmas star; Behnke closes the window. Courtesy of DEFA-Stiftung, Berlin.

only be tendentious and that a West German director who worked for DEFA could only serve Communist interests. One conservative newspaper, *Die Welt*, offered its readers a general warning that everyone who paid to see a DEFA film was supporting the East German Socialist Unity Party.<sup>39</sup> In May 1950, *Die Welt* went so far as to identify the resistance group in *Rotation* as Communists, complaining about the film's "cloven hoof": *Rotation* represented communism as "the anti-Nazi element *per se*," while telling the audience nothing about dissident bourgeois democrats.<sup>40</sup> In point of fact, the film never explicitly associates Behnke's brother-in-law Kurt Blank or his group with any particular party. Blank is a proletarian antifascist, but he and his comrades could as easily be Social Democrats.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, while East German reviews referred to the many different faces of the prisoners released in the film's liberation scene as representing the breadth of an antifascist popular front,<sup>42</sup> the West German *Die Welt* accused the film of narrow-minded party recruitment and ascribed to Behnke a latent affinity with the Communists. According to *Die Welt's* sarcastic summary, *Rotation* suggested that "the rehabilitated minor Nazi party member" was allowed to "sink into the motherly arms of the GDR's Socialist Unity Party SED" after he had "corrected his pardonable mistake by helping the underground Communist movement."<sup>43</sup> Actually, the film made no mention of the SED, and the Unity Party had not been founded during the timeframe of *Rotation*. But *Die Welt* did not let itself be swayed by such historical facts and filmic details. In the view of its critic, it was precisely this sort of "unarticulated bias" that made the East German production so cunning and dangerous.<sup>44</sup>

Other West German newspapers formulated similar arguments against the film. At the same time, however, some of them suggested, in the spirit of the totalitarianism thesis, that low-ranking East German functionaries in the audience saw themselves in the mirror of Behnke, the intimidated conformist.<sup>45</sup> Only in this wrong-headed way—by interpreting East German communism as a repetition of the Nazi dictatorship—did some West German reviewers of *Rotation* sense ambiguities in the film's portrayal of the *Mitläufer*. With the imperturbable self-righteousness of Cold Warriors, these Western critics ignored the fact that Staudte had characterized himself as provoked by the "omen of an unscrupulous restoration" that he saw not in the GDR but in the Federal Republic of Germany. In the light of "crusading slogans against the East" and agitation for rearmament, he intended *Rotation* as an admonition against a return to "politics based on power."<sup>46</sup> That is, *Rotation* does warn that history might repeat itself. The film's stress of the motif of repetition goes beyond the rotation of the printing press that provides its title. In the beginning of the film, Hans Behnke meets his wife-to-be at the same place where, at the end of the film, his son Helmuth (wearing his father's suit) meets his girlfriend. In this later scene, the characters are aware of the recurrence, but Helmuth lectures that they have learned their lesson and won't make the same mistakes again. But in contrast to the anticommunists who equated the rule of the SED with the rule of the Nazi Party, Staudte diagnosed the danger of repetition in the West.

Ironically enough, just when the West German press denounced *Rotation* for serving dangerous Communist interests, the film disappeared from GDR movie theaters. With the Stalinization of the SED and a hardened cultural and political party line, the film soon seemed to lack the essential theme of class struggle. So, West German newspapers suddenly changed their evaluations. Reporting on semi-legal showings of the still officially unreleased film, they now called *Rotation* a largely unbiased—and therefore atypical—DEFA film.<sup>47</sup> A few reviews suggested that the obstructive cultural politics of the Federal Republic had “thrown the baby out with the bath water” by banning all film imports from the GDR.<sup>48</sup> After all, West German film critics admitted, not only did their own films typically fail to address the period of National Socialism, they also failed to attain the quality of the best DEFA productions.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike with *The Murderers Are among Us*, changes in the political climate did suggest new readings of *Rotation*. However, just as with *The Murderers Are among Us*, reviewers continued to fail to notice the film’s critical depiction of *Mitläufer* conformity in Nazi Germany.

## CONCLUSIONS

Staudte did not realize his desire to provoke a debate in postwar Germany on the behavior of “ordinary” Germans during the Nazi dictatorship. Not only did his indictment of the *Mitläufer* Mertens and his gradual absolution escape most reviewers, but the conciliatory “reeducation” of Behnke was also never understood as the director had intended it. The problem may have been that both characters were more skeptical of and more resistant to the regime than most Germans had been. Had filmgoers viewed these protagonists critically, they would have had to take an even more critical look at themselves. Instead, many critics made heroes of both Mertens and Behnke. And the impotence of these heroes then proved reassuring. Even these fictional heroes had achieved nothing; even they had been unable to stop crimes sanctioned by a criminal regime. How then could the “ordinary” German have done any better?

In other words, besides Germans who never understood what was wrong with “following along,” many may have felt at least latent qualms of conscience.<sup>50</sup> If one knew—however subconsciously—that one was

complicit, it would hardly be fair to blame others, even fictional characters. Thus the reluctance to criticize would have been motivated by doubts about one's own right to accuse others. Indeed, some hints in the reviews suggest this was sometimes the case. The idea, for example, that *The Murderers Are among Us* could purify empathetic and deeply stirred viewers implies that German film audiences needed purifying. Excusing or justifying Mertens also points to an unarticulated recognition of the need for some kind of apology. Viewing the film's reception from this perspective, Wolfdietrich Schnurre, who vehemently condemned Mertens together with all German soldiers, was not the lonely exception that he seemed to be at first sight. True, he came to different conclusions than his fellow critics, but perhaps other German ex-servicemen in the audience shared Schnurre's sense of collective responsibility.

Beyond the general trend, common to both East and West German critics, of failing to recognize the *Mitläufer's* responsibility, the reviews tell us about the reception process. Looking at all these articles together, one finds immense variation in plot summaries, character descriptions, and in the details thought worthy of mention. The variation in the reviews I have surveyed is not surprising as viewers are influenced by so many factors. Even before viewing a film they can be affected by press material from the production company, published reviews, and evaluations of acquaintances. Sensitivity to certain topics, preferences for certain actresses and actors, different viewing experiences and differing receptiveness to subtle messages conveyed by images, music, montage and genre are some of the other ingredients that combine to mold a person's viewing of and reporting on a film. Any sample of historical film reviews therefore validates the everyday experience that each person seems to watch his or her own film. That is to say, reception is always interpretation and therefore an active, to some extent even creative, process. This independence of mind surfaces in reviewers' personal conclusions: whether they evaluate Mertens's objection to the mass shooting as courageous or half-hearted; whether they blame Mertens for the failure of his protest or see this failure as evidence for the powerlessness of the individual in Nazi Germany in general and in the army in particular; whether they characterize Kurt Blank in *Rotation* as the Communist who monopolizes resistance or more as a catalyst for Behnke's reformation.

Still one finds that polarized evaluations of the films' main characters are nearly unanimous. Apparently, the protagonists touched widely shared feelings among German filmgoers and spontaneously provoked emotional and resolute reactions instead of careful consideration and discussion. Critics in particular understood that their readers expected moral assessments of the films' central figures. But, when it came to minor characters or less important details, interpretations varied more widely as critics felt free to be selective, commenting on some and neglecting others. In fact, sometimes reviewers indulged in profound misreadings. Consider, for example, the critics' responses to Mr. Mondschein, the old optician who lives in the same apartment house as Susanne Wallner and Hans Mertens. Having saved some old glasses and tools from the rubble, he runs his little shop in order to help people "see more clearly." For many years, critics overlooked various subtle hints that Mr. Mondschein is a Jewish survivor awaiting the return of his emigrant son.<sup>51</sup> Some interpreted his name ("Moonshine") metaphorically, seeing him merely as a touching old man whose kindness softens the harsh reality of the destroyed neighborhood. Others made what was for them the most obvious association and saw the Jewish survivor as the father of a missing German soldier. Hardly any of the critics seem to have been interested in the story of this victim. Instead of criticizing the film for its refusal to tell the audience how Mondschein had survived—the response of most viewers today—many at that time complained that the character introduced too many detours and slowed the narrative.

A more amusing misinterpretation can be found in a newspaper announcing a re-broadcast of *Rotation* on television in the 1980s. The article's summary of the film focuses on what it takes to be the film's theme of the male protagonist's politicization. In the light of the gender sensitivity of the 1980s, the author apparently wanted to compensate for the masculine bias of the narrative. Deliberately, one therefore assumes, the accompanying still photograph shows not Hans Behnke but a young woman. It is the still unmarried Lotte sitting on the floor, hunching over papers which those who have seen the film will know to be sewing patterns. In the actual scene, she is about to tell Hans that she is pregnant, and she is already busy preparing the nest. However, the caption read: "Lotte Behnke ... also works for the resistance movement."<sup>52</sup> If the author had ever watched the film, his wish to see a proletarian couple as brave resistance

fighters would have been disappointed. Lotte's only connection to the underground is her brother Kurt, whom she loves and about whose well-being she constantly worries. But she remains completely naive politically. Kurt and Hans never discuss politics in front of her, and Hans hides his contact with Kurt's resistance group from her. To be sure, this misreading is not based on any *reception* of the film at all. But this anecdote can illustrate the potentially dominant role of expectations and prejudices in reviewers' attitudes.

The interval between the two films' release dates and the fact that reviews of both appeared over a long period of time allow one to assess in which ways and to what extent the historical context shaped reception. If the immediate reception of *The Murderers Are among Us* suggests some degree of unarticulated shame during the initial months after the war in Germany regarding complicity in Nazi crimes, later reviews indicate that such unspoken sentiments had diminished over time. German self-assurance seems to have grown, opportunism was paying off once again, and the reviewers more and more lost sight of Mertens's moral conflicts.

Furthermore, the reception of *Rotation* indicates that the escalating East–West confrontation provided opportunities for laying blame on the “other side.” That is, in both East and West Germany, a historical critique of the *Mitläufer* and the effects of his behavior was transformed into a contemporary critique of the opposing German society and state. This us-versus-them mentality blocked virtually all critical commentary on the shared past. A further consequence of the Cold War was that the population in one German state saw the film eight years later than the other. And the conflict between the two governments limited the willingness and ability of critics to take closer and more individualistic views. For many West German journalists, the mere fact that DEFA had produced *Rotation* mobilized their prejudices against the East German film. The subsequent shift in their evaluations of the film in the middle of the 1950s occurred only because it had come to transgress the GDR's new official line on cultural politics. In other words, views on the opposing German state, rather than the film itself, molded its reception. The discussion of German complicity in Nazism and its crimes that Staudte had intended his two films to initiate thus never materialized. It is only now, after some fifty years of research on victims, perpetrators and bystanders in Nazi Germany,

that the problem of the *Mitläufer* immediately catches the eye of a later generation of viewers.

## NOTES

1. On German postwar cinema, see Eric Rentschler, "Germany: The Past that Would Not Go Away," in William Luhr, ed., *World Cinema Since 1945* (New York, 1987), 208–51; Fritz Göttler, "Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm: Land der Väter," in Wolfgang Jacobsen, Anton Kaes and Hans Helmut Prinzler, eds., *Geschichte des deutschen Films* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1993), 171–210; Wolfgang Gersch, "Film in der DDR: Die verlorene Alternative," in *ibid.*, 323–64; Wolfgang Becker and Norbert Schöll, *In jenen Tagen... Wie der deutsche Nachkriegsfilm die Vergangenheit bewältigte* (Opladen, 1995); Heide Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler* (Chapel Hill and London, 1995); Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, 2001), 123–70; Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (London, 2001), 86–114.

2. Contemporaries seem to have used the term "rubble film" dismissively, and theater owners assumed that audiences wanted to escape a harsh reality rather than see it on screen. So, such films soon went out of fashion. On the genre, see Peter Pleyer, *Deutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1948* (Münster, 1965); Thomas Brandlmeier, "Von Hitler zu Adenauer: Deutsche Trümmerfilme," in Hilmar Hoffmann and Walter Schobert, eds., *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Westdeutscher Nachkriegsfilm 1946–1962* (Frankfurt/Main, 1989), 33–59; Christiane Mückenberger, "Zeit der Hoffnungen: 1946 bis 1949," in Filmmuseum Potsdam, ed., *Das zweite Leben der Filmstadt Babelsberg: DEFA-Spielfilme 1946–1992* (Berlin, 1994), 8–49; Bettina Greffrath, *Gesellschaftsbilder der Nachkriegszeit: Deutsche Spielfilme 1945–1949* (Pfaffenweiler, 1995); Robert R. Shandley, *Rubble Films: German Cinema in the Shadow of the Third Reich* (Philadelphia, 2001).

3. Lutz Niethammer, *Die Mitläuferfabrik* (Bonn, 1982); Klaus-Dietmar Henke, "Die Trennung vom Nationalsozialismus: Selbstzerstörung, politische Säuberung, 'Entnazifizierung,' Strafverfolgung," in Klaus-Dietmar Henke and Hans Woller, eds., *Politische Säuberung in Europa: Die Abrechnung mit Faschismus und Kollaboration nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 1991), 21–83.

4. Besides the number and the availability of these sources, another advantage is the fact that, as a rule, professional writers have the skill to articulate their interpretations more or less clearly and without much contradiction, which is not



always the case with letters to authors (as anyone who has ever worked with these sources might have painfully experienced).

5. Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema* (New York, 1975); Klaus Kreimeier, *Die Ufa-Story: Geschichte eines Filmkonzerns* (Munich, 1992); Karsten Witte, "Film im Nationalsozialismus: Blendung und Überblendung," in Jacobsen, Kaes and Prinzler, eds., *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, 119–170; Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi-Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge, 1996).

6. All films that Staudte directed or acted in are listed in Hans-Michael Bock, ed., *Cine Graph: Lexikon zum deutschsprachigen Film* (Munich, 1993). For Staudte's biography, see Malte Ludin, *Wolfgang Staudte* (Reinbek, 1996).

7. See two interviews with Staudte, one from 1963 published in Ulrich Gregor, ed., *Wie sie filmen: Fünfzehn Gespräche mit Regisseuren der Gegenwart* (Gütersloh, 1966), 19–53, especially 46–47, and the other from 1974 published in Egon Netenjakob, et al., *Staudte* (Berlin, 1991), 131–49, especially 131–32.

8. Regarding the Susanne Wallner story not told by the film and the function of women for male returnees, see my article, "Die Mörder sind unter uns oder: Vom Verschwinden der Opfer," *WerkstattGeschichte* 9, no. 25 (2000): 105–15.

9. "Die Mörder sind unter uns: Ein Film von Wolfgang Staudte," unpublished exposé, Nachlass Staudte, Filmmuseum Düsseldorf.

10. In interviews, Staudte claimed that at first he had regretted the intervention but later recognized it as justified.

11. The staged appearance by the "loving woman" was much easier to portray than an internal transformation within the male hero; it also heightened the scene's melodramatic impact. Some reviewers of the film criticized Mertens's lack of autonomy on the grounds that self-determination has been essential for the male hero since ancient heroic poetry and drama. (The quotation is my literal translation of the German dialogue. According to the English subtitle, Mertens answers, "No, but we have the duty to see that justice is done—and that millions of innocent lives are vindicated.")

12. On *Rotation*, see Marc Silberman, "The Discourse of Powerlessness: Wolfgang Staudte's *Rotation*," in idem, *German Cinema: Texts in Context* (Detroit, 1995), 99–113. Silberman and I mostly agree in our interpretation of the film and its protagonist, though he is much more interested in pictorial and filmic details than I need for my argument here.

13. It is only then that Helmuth turns in the leaflets, not immediately after finding them, as Silberman claims. Helmuth can therefore not be blamed for his uncle's capture and death by torture. His parents, who are both cunningly interrogated by the Gestapo but steadfastly refuse to give any information about Kurt and the underground, are also not responsible. The montage *could* suggest other-

wise, but there is no hint of this in the script. See Silberman, “The Discourse of Powerlessness,” 108.

14. As Silberman rightly argues, the idea of Behnke’s self-reflection is underlined by the film’s opening frame, which shows Hans in his prison cell reviewing the preceding events of his life in a flashback. In addition, several close-ups on Hans’s eyes stress the motif of sight/insight. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

15. Interview with Staudte from 1963, 40–41; interview from 1974, 134. Staudte reported that this argument had been crucial for him personally.

16. Script of *Rotation*, unpublished, Collection of the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen Konrad Wolf, Potsdam, sequence 117, take 495.

17. Films were expurgated not only in the GDR, but also in the FRG. While there was no overt West German censorship, several powerful devices such as government-secured bank loans, state film prizes, and tax breaks for films that did not question the political and social status quo had a similar function. See Rentschler, “Germany: The Past That Would Not Go Away,” 214–15; Jürgen Berger, “Bürgen heisst zahlen—und manchmal auch zensieren: Die Filmbürgerschaften des Bundes 1950–1955,” in Hoffmann and Schobert, eds., *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, 80–97; Stefan Zahlmann, “‘Besonders wertvoll’: Filmeinschätzung und Zuschauerfokussierung in der BRD und DDR der 60er Jahre,” in Wilhelm Hofmann, ed., *Visuelle Politik: Filmpolitik und die visuelle Konstruktion des Politischen* (Baden-Baden, 1998), 36–48.

18. See Staudte’s letter to the director of DEFA, 22 Sept. 1949, unpublished, Staudte Nachlass, Filmmuseum Düsseldorf. There Staudte wrote he would not have left the DEFA because of various earlier disagreements if additionally he had not come to “the sad realization that DEFA had been capable of sacrificing the historical truth because of insignificant political reservations.”

19. In a letter to the film journalist Ulrich Seelmann-Eggebert from 21 March 1952 (unpublished, Archives of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin), Staudte once again played down his minor roles in Nazi propaganda films. And he went on to say, “I do not want to be misunderstood. This description [of the films’ production] is meant to be an explanation, not a justification. Looking back, I today feel guilty for many of my deeds and omissions. In response to this feeling I wrote the film *The Murderers Are among Us* and later, after the indictment, the defense: *Rotation*.”

20. Anneke de Rudder, “‘Warum das ganze Theater?’ Der Nürnberger Prozess in den Augen der Zeitgenossen,” *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 6 (1997): 218–42.

21. In an early sequence of the film, a drunk Mertens plays chess in the dressing room of a cabaret theater with one of the dancers. He blows cigarette smoke over the chessboard and asks rhetorically whether or not the board looks like a battlefield.

Cinematography and soundtrack further underline this association. When the dancer risks two of her pawns to save her king, Mertens mocks her “monarchist heart.” The woman defends herself by pointing out that it is just a harmless game with chessmen made of wood. “Wood, ivory or bones!” Mertens exclaims. “The spirit of eternal reaction. The motto of the infantry is: Save the King. The pawns can go to hell as long as the King is secure. How I hate this game.” He then throws the chessboard on the floor. This scene portrays all soldiers, including the German soldiers in World War II, as victims, and the political authorities in the Soviet occupation zone shared this point of view. The communist theory of fascism held only the economic, political and military elites responsible. See Olaf Groehler, “Der Holocaust in der Geschichtsschreibung der DDR,” in Ulrich Herbert and Olaf Groehler, *Zweierlei Bewältigung: Vier Beiträge über den Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in den beiden deutschen Staaten* (Hamburg, 1992), 41–66.

22. For example, in the review by M.L.R., “Neuorientierung des deutschen Films: Der erste Spielfilm der DEFA,” *Die Union—Landeszeitung Sachsen der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands*, no 92, 23 Oct. 1946.

23. Peter Kast, “Tiefernte Mahnung zur Wachsamkeit,” *Vorwärts—Berliner Volksblatt*, no. 159, 17 Oct. 1946.

24. Even if Mertens bears some of the traits of a tragic hero, this reading goes against the grain. The film emphasizes throughout that people have choices and that they decide for themselves how to act or not to act. The later “rubble films” did a much better job of satisfying the audience’s desire for tragic, inexorable fates (and their apologetic function). In *Zugvögel* (Migrating birds) of 1948, for example, one character explicitly said: “We can’t do anything; things simply happen to us.” See Rentschler, “Germany: The Past That Would Not Go Away,” 211–12.

25. In an early scene, and in a different context, Mertens uses this apologetic argument himself. He had promised to give a camera that he had found in the apartment where he was living to one of the dancers, so that she could sell it on the black market. Once he meets Susanne Wallner, the owner of the apartment, he decides not to steal her camera. The dancer then accuses him of being mean. Mertens explains that it would have been even meaner for him to bring the camera. He proceeds to lecture all the women in the theater’s dressing room: “You have the choice between good and evil only in fairy tales. We never have anything but the choice between the bigger and the smaller meanness.” As the viewer does not yet know anything about Mertens’s war experience, the dialogue easily escapes one’s attention. I thank Vipul Shah for reminding me of this sequence.

26. The image not only portrays Mertens as powerless, it is one of a number of takes that reveal violations of and lipservice to the Christian ethic of compassion and peace. In 1942, Brückner gives orders for the preparation of the massacre while trimming a Christmas tree; as the Polish civilians are shot, Brückner and his

men sing sentimental Christmas songs; and while the viewers still hear their off-screen voices, the camera moves through the room of the captured Polish building and catches a crucifix that the German soldiers have carelessly hung their helmets and guns on. Finally, on the first Christmas Eve after the war, Brückner lectures his employees about the Christian commandment of brotherly love, pretending that his factory is not a capitalist company but a (non-hierarchical) family. Mertens is listening in, and the cue that prompts his flashback to the images of 1942 is Brückner's hypocritical praise of "a peaceful Germany ... in which justice reigns and humaneness prevails."

27. E. F. Gürtler, "Wir dürfen nicht vergessen... Zum ersten deutschen Spielfilm," *Aufbau*, no. 11 (Nov. 1946): 1172.

28. For example, Enno Kind, "Menschenschicksale von heute," *Neues Deutschland*, 7 Oct. 1946.

29. G. H., "Die Mörder sind unter uns," *Filmdienst der Jugend*, no. 128 (1948). The first sentence in the German original is: "Den Traum von einer Zivilbegegnung mit unseren steinernen Kriegsvorgesetzten hat nach der Heimkehr aus der Gefangenschaft mancher von uns geträumt."

30. *Ibid.*

31. Walter Lennig, "Ein Film der deutschen Wirklichkeit: Zur Uraufführung des DEFA-Films *Die Mörder sind unter uns*," *Berliner Zeitung*, 17 Oct. 1946.

32. See for example, Friedrich Luft, "Die Mörder sind unter uns: Der erste deutsche Film nach dem Kriege," *Tagesspiegel*, 16 Oct. 1946.

33. Wolfdietrich Schnurre, "Film-Rundschau," *Deutsche Rundschau*, no. 8 (Nov. 1946): 161.

34. Th. K. [Theodor Kotulla], "Die Mörder sind unter uns," *Filmkritik* 4, no. 1 (1960): 27–28.

35. Arbeitsausschuss der Freiwilligen Selbstkontrolle FSK, Jugendprotokoll, 15 July 1959, Prüf.-Nr. 20097, unpublished, Landesbildstelle Berlin.

36. On the similarities and differences between *Rotation* and the proletarian cinema in the Weimar Republic, as well as Bertolt Brecht's concept of epic theater, see Silberman, "The Discourse of Powerlessness," 104–6; for Brecht's definitions of *Lehrstück*, see Jan Knopf, *Brecht-Handbuch*, Vol. 1: *Theater: Eine Ästhetik der Widersprüche* (Stuttgart, 1980), 417–25.

37. For example, Hermann Müller, "Rotation: Ein Wolfgang Staudte-Film," *Vorwärts*, 18 Sept. 1949; G.G., "Rotation: Ein DEFA-Film," *Sächsisches Tageblatt*, 1 Oct. 1949; schu- [sic], "Staudtes *Rotation*," *Hamburger Freie Presse*, 10 July 1950.

38. "Rotation," *Film-Dienst* 10, no. 5981 (11 July 1957); n- [sic], "Ebbe in der moralischen Kasse: Import-Film zur Woche der Brüderlichkeit," *Die Andere*

*Zeitung*, Nov. 1961; Fred Gehler, "Rotation. DEFA-Erinnerungen," *Sonntag*, 22 April 1979.

39. Hans-Dietrich Weiß, "Diktatorische Filmpolitik: Wo bleibt der DEFA-Film *Rotation*," *Die Welt* (Berlin edition), 6 July 1949.

40. Karl Andreas Eppenhagen, "Mitläuferproblematik im Film: Bemerkungen zu dem DEFA-Streifen *Rotation*," *Die Welt*, 25 May 1950. As soon as the resistance was identified in terms of party membership, everybody seems to have felt the lack of representatives of their own group among it. For example, the Catholic journal *Filmdienst* also criticized the film for failing to mention Christian anti-Nazism. See, "Rotation," *Film-Dienst*.

41. Kurt Blank returns from Prague, where the Social Democratic Party (SPD) executive went into exile. At a time when the Social Democrats were not at all pleased with the compulsory unification of their party with the Communist KPD in the Soviet occupation zone/GDR, Staudte may very well have deliberately avoided mentioning any specific party in order not to reduce the number of sympathizers with the resistance in the audience. (At least the East German Communists at that time stressed the notion of a united working class.) On the compulsory unification of the East German SPD with the East German KPD to form the SED, see Andreas Malycha, *Auf dem Weg zur SED: Die Sozialdemokratie und die Bildung einer Einheitspartei in den Ländern der SBZ* (Bonn, 1995).

42. See David Beetham, "The Comintern: From 'Social Fascism' to Popular Front," in idem, *Marxists in Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period* (Manchester, 1983), 17–23.

43. Eppenhagen, "Mitläuferproblematik." After the founding of the SED, the party indeed made efforts to integrate so-called "minor Nazi Party comrades" (i.e. *kleine Pgs*, the abbreviation for the term "Parteigenossen" that was used in the NSDAP). In announcements by the SED, these "minor" Nazi Party members were also named "Mitläufer." Because of its (successful) policy of integration, Jan Foitzik sarcastically characterizes the SED as a "new type of *Mitläufer*-party (*eine Mitläuferpartei neuen Typs*)." Jürgen Danyel, "Die SED und die 'kleinen Pgs': Zur politischen Integration der ehemaligen NSDAP-Mitglieder in der SBZ/DDR," in Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek, eds., *Helden, Täter und Verräter: Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus* (Berlin, 1999), 177–96; Jan Foitzik, "Die stalinistischen 'Säuberungen' in den ostmitteleuropäischen kommunistischen Parteien: Ein vergleichender Überblick," in Hermann Weber and Dieter Staritz, eds., *Kommunisten verfolgen Kommunisten: Stalinistischer Terror und "Säuberungen" in den kommunistischen Parteien Europas seit den dreißiger Jahren* (Berlin, 1993), 415.

44. Eppenhagen, "Mitläuferproblematik." When the film was broadcast on West German public television in 1958, the party whip of the *Gesamtdeutscher Block* in the Bavarian State Parliament, Dr. Becher, started an official protest against

this alleged “Communist propaganda action.” See, “Film und Politik,” *Deutsche Woche*, 11 June 1958.

45. For example, Ny, “*Rotation* im Filmclub,” *Ruhr-Nachrichten*, 26 Sept. 1950; “Film-Club zeigte *Rotation*,” *Westfälische Rundschau*, 3 Oct. 1950.

46. Wolfgang Staudte, “*Rotation*,” undated typescript, unpublished, Archives of the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin.

47. For example, “Neue Filme in München: *Rotation*,” *Abendzeitung*, 8 Sept. 1953; “Wolfgang Staudtes *Rotation*,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11 Sept. 1953; pth [*sic*], “Herausforderung des deutschen Gewissens: Die Staatliche Landesbildstelle zeigte Wolfgang Staudtes Film *Rotation*,” *Hamburger Echo*, 29 Jan. 1958.

48. For example, E.S., “*Rotation*,” *Erlanger Nachrichten*, 26 Jan. 1956.

49. For example, M., “*Rotation*: Defa-Film beim Unabhängigen Filmclub,” *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, 29 Jan. 1951; KS, “*Rotation*,” *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 Oct. 1957.

50. This explanatory approach accords with Norbert Frei’s thesis that it was the Germans themselves who invented the accusation of “collective guilt” and projected it onto the occupation powers in order to deny the accusation and feel insulted by it. Norbert Frei, “Von deutscher Erfindungskraft oder: Die Kollektivschuldthese in der Nachkriegszeit,” in Gary Smith, ed., *Hannah Arendt Revisited: “Eichmann in Jerusalem” und die Folgen* (Frankfurt/Main, 2000), 163–76.

51. First, the name “Mondschein” resembles Jewish family names; second, Susanne and Hans repeatedly stress that it was a miracle that the old man had survived. But since Mondschein’s apartment house, and all its occupants, were untouched by the bombing that destroyed the rest of the neighborhood, it is hardly miraculous that an inhabitant of that building survived. However, it is miraculous that a Jew—no matter which building he lived in—survived in Germany. Finally, Mondschein receives a letter from his son, who now lives in the US. All this strongly hints at his Jewishness. For more on the reception of this figure and on his untold story, see my article, “*Die Mörder sind unter uns*.”

52. “Von der *Rotation* zum Widerstand,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, 11 Dec. 1985.