

Press kit

THE CAPTAIN

DER HAUPTMANN – Original title

Written and directed by Robert Schwentke



Produced by

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In co-production with Alfama Films and Opus Film



World Premiere at *Toronto International Film Festival* — *Special Presentations*

Screening dates

Press & Industry 1	09/07/17	3:00PM	Scotiabank 14 (307)	DCP 4K (D-Cinema)
Public 1	09/09/17	3:15PM	TIFF Bell Lightbox Cinema 1 (523)	DCP 4K (D-Cinema)
Public 2	09/11/17	4:15PM	Scotiabank 10 (228)	DCP 4K (D-Cinema)
Press & Industry 2	09/13/17	11:30AM	Scotiabank 8 (183)	DCP 4K (D-Cinema)
Public 3	09/16/17	3:30PM	Scotiabank 14 (307)	DCP 4K (D-Cinema)

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Press photos

Press photos you will get on our website (press) with the password: willkommen
www.filmgalerie451.de

World Sales

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Synopsis short

In the last, desperate moments of World War II, a young German soldier fighting for survival finds a Nazi captain's uniform. Impersonating an officer, the man quickly takes on the monstrous identity of the perpetrators he is trying to escape from.

Synopsis long

In a no-man's-land in Germany, two weeks before the end of the war, private Willi Herold (Max Hubacher), runs for his life. There is not even a thought of rejoining his platoon; it's every man for himself. Just before he is cut down by German officer Junker (Alexander Fehling), Herold finds a hiding place and manages to live another day.

Herold, left to fend for himself, is cold and hungry. His clothes are filthy rags and food and safety seem far away. When he meets another exhausted soldier on the way, the two sneak into a farmhouse to find food. During an attempt to steal some eggs, Herold's partner in crime is killed by the farmers. Herold fights with a farmhand and kills him. This time, it was only an accident.

Herold escapes. The next morning, he sees an abandoned officer's car by the side of the road. In it, he finds a suitcase with a captain's coat, a uniform and a pair of shoes. The freezing young man tries on the captain's coat and uniform. Miraculously, he is transformed into the spitting image of a real officer! Suddenly a soldier, Private Walter Freytag (Milan Peschel), appears. If Herold can't vamp his way through this situation, he's toast, so he goes for it: Herold impersonates the officer, chin up, chest out, and commands Freytag to become his driver.

In a nearby village, Herold invites himself and Freytag to a feast at a local inn and pretends to be on a top-secret mission to report about the conditions behind the frontline. Herold writes down the complaints of the various locals at the inn, all of whom have been robbed or taken advantage of by the military. He promises to reimburse them to the penny! Sceptical of this gravy-train, the inn keeper Gerd Schnabel (Alexander Hörbe) presents Herold with a captured looter and throws down the gauntlet before "the Captain": what are you going to do about this ne'er do well? The Captain has to act. And so he shoots the looter in the street in cold blood. Feeling safer in the risky confines of the farmhouse than out on the open road, Herold returns to the farm, where he and Freytag stumble into a wild frenzy: a group of drunk soldiers are celebrating while holding the farmers hostage. Herold reacts quickly: he calls the men to order and agrees to attach them to his command as requested by the thug Kipinski (Frederick Lau). The "Task Force Herold" is born.

This ragtag band of starving ruffians pushes along the antique roads of the German outback...until a cortege of military police stop Herold's crew. They want to see ID. Herold's sanity is at the breaking point right now, but his animal terror comes up with the perfect solution to his present problem: He tells the military cops that he is on a special investigative mission to study morale at the front...authorized by no less than the Führer himself. Along with the military police, Task Force Herold makes its way to a second camp, a detention site for soldiers of the Wehrmacht. This camp is a grim, dilapidated mini-sized, ramshackle jail that looks as if it will soon collapse in a heap of filth and exhaustion. Here, a suspicious but also over-burdened SA-Führer Schütte (Bernd Hölscher) believes Herold was sent to implement a court martial for escaped prisoners...

But who is authorized to give permission for this? Is it Dr Thiel, the Deputy Special Emissary for the Justice Department? Is it Prison Warden Hansen (Waldemar Kobus), in charge of the prisoners and the inner section of the camp? Is it Sergeant Brockhoff (Marko Dyrlich)? Herold finds himself coming up against the greatest terror of the prison-masters: not their prisoners – but taking action without getting the Proper Signoff from Above.

Who is going to take responsibility for what? While this remains uncertain, a proactive Schütte gives a group of prisoners an order: Dig a mass grave. Time to act for Herold. Go big or go home. Herold improvises: With the help of an anti-aircraft gun, he begins to brutally mow down the first 30 prisoners. The flack gun gets stuck, before all are killed. Schütte orders everyone to shoot the remaining prisoners. Herold orders Freytag to execute the last survivor. Horrified, almost unable to obey, Freytag shoots the prisoner in the head.

To celebrate the success of their can-do solution, Herold throws a hot party at the barracks. While some prisoners (Samuel Finzi, Wolfram Koch) are forced to perform for the soldiers, food and schnapps are served in abundance. But the night quickly gets out of control. Outside the barracks, Herold ties four prisoners together and asks them to flee. One by one, they get shot down. As the shots fire, the prisoners who remain standing try to run, dragging the corpses of their fellows alongside them...till they, too, are dropped.

The next morning, Allied planes appear out of nowhere and bomb the camp to the ground. The barracks are burning, the ground is covered with corpses. A colour shot shows the area of the camp as it looks in the present day, with tall grass covering up any trace of the former camp.

Taskforce Herold continues its mission in a nearby town. They find a mayor who flies a white flag outside his door. They summarily cap him in the head and start an orgy in the local hotel. When Kipinski takes a woman Herold had his eye on, their friendship ends brutally: Kipinski is forced to strip down at the town square and is executed.

The night ends in orgiastic frenzy at the hotel. A last get-down, before the German Military Police raids the place at dawn and arrests Herold and his men. Herold's cover is finally blown.

After facing four hours of German military court, it is determined that Herold is, in fact, the kind of get-the-job-done chap the army can ill afford throwing away. Besides, he stood at attention for four hours through the whole hearing! This guy is a precious resource. Herold is given a reprieve. He uses this opportunity to escape the building and disappears into a forest...just as he emerged from the woods at the beginning.

As the credits roll, we see Herold and his men roaming the streets of a German town in the present. They carry on bullying, harassing and robbing innocent passers-by, who seem somewhat, but not terribly, surprised...



Foto by © Jennifer Howard

Biography Robert Schwentke

Robert Schwentke was born 1968 in Germany. He studied Literature and Philosophy at the Eberhard Karl University in Tuebingen and later earned an MFA in directing from the American Film Institute.

Filmography Robert Schwentke

- 2017 The Captain (Writer and Director)
- 2016 Divergent - Allegiant (Director)
- 2015 Divergent – Insurgent (Director)
- 2014 The Novice - Pilot (Director)
- 2013 R.I.P.D. (Director)
- 2010 R.E.D. (Director)
- 2009 The Time Traveler's Wife (Director)
- 2009 Lie to Me (TV Series) - Pilot (Director)
- 2005 Flightplan (Director)
- 2003 Eierdiebe (Writer and Director)
- 2002 Tattoo (Writer and Director)
- 2001 Tatort – Moerdergrube (Writer)
- 1999 Tatort – Drei Affen (Writer)
- 1998 Tatort - Bildersturm (Writer)

Director's statement

Almost 70 years after the fact, the harsh brutalities of World War II still elicit incomprehension and dismay. By present-day standards, the violent acts committed seem abnormal, psychopathic, horrific.

But horror is a moral, not an analytical concept.

In order to explain Willi Herold's actions we have to understand the world he lived in and not just our own world. We need to go beyond mere moral responses and experience the world from his point of view. Non-morally, so to speak, see what he saw, feel what he felt.

Our audience needs to experience Herold's historical, psychological and social reality directly, viscerally, emotionally. This story won't be told from the outside in, but from the inside out. We will fully immerse the audience in Herold's state of mind.

Our goal is not to justify or forgive Herold's actions by contextualizing them, or worse: by introducing a moral relativism -- but to understand the frame of reference which made these actions possible and so arrive at the general through the specific:

Herold's highly particularized perspective of a specific historical event allows us to glimpse a universal truth about the human condition in wartimes -- past and present.

Why tell this story? Because: "Through the past we comprehend the present, and through the present we prepare for the future." (Arno Schmidt).

In psychological terms, the inhabitants of the Third Reich were as normal as people in all other societies at all other times. The spectrum of perpetrators was a cross section of normal society and no specific group of people proved immune to the temptation, in Günther Anders's phrase, of "inhumanity with impunity."

They are us. We are them. The past is now.

(Robert Schwentke)

We are standing close to the abyss

An interview with director Robert Schwentke about THE CAPTAIN

Interview: Toby Ashraf

THE CAPTAIN is set during the last days of WW II and is based on the real-life character of Willi Herold. When did you first get the idea of turning his story into a fiction film?

National Socialism was a dynamic system – it took a great many people for this cultural catastrophe to occur. I was interested in the back row of perpetrators. Some were ideologically driven, others were opportunists, legitimized thugs, or simply got out of the way of evil. These were not the architects of the system they served, but the people who lived next door to you - the “little people” who kept the Nazi system alive and going. I knew I wanted to make a movie from the perspective of these perpetrators and I so I started to search for a suitable story.

So at first, there was the idea to make a film about the phenomenon of a generation, and Willi Herold's story offered itself to you later, so to speak?

Yes.

What fascinated you about the perspective of the perpetrators, since it bears the risk to make the villain the hero and tell a film through the eyes of someone who is very difficult to identify with?

It confronts the audience with a different set of propositions than a movie that allows them to graft onto a morally upright character. We all hope and imagine that we would have been morally upright and brave enough to oppose the system. But history and the facts don't bear that out. I wanted there to be no explicit moral compass, forcing the audience to find their own point of view, to ask themselves “What would I have done?” We are standing close to the abyss again and it is important to confront it. Contemplate our own limitations, strengths and beliefs – not to pretend it is going to resolve itself.

THE CAPTAIN is your first period picture. How long and specific was your research concerning set design, scenography, costumes and such?

Once I had come across the story of Willi Herold, I tried to figure out how to make it into a film and what kind of film I wanted it to be. What would be my movie about violence and the German National Socialist past? I realised that I had to do a lot of research and read books on history and psychology, diaries and novels by the meter...trying to find the answer to: “How could this have happened?”

I read the last remaining file on the case at the state archives in Oldenburg and visited the Gedenkstätte Esterwegen - the Emsland workcamp memorial - where a former prisoner had built a miniature of the camp from memory. The proportions were purposefully inaccurate: towers were too tall, fences too thick, the gate impossibly solid – a subjective, not factual view of the past. It affected me more deeply and rang truer than a proper scale model would have. Even though The Captain is not told through the perspective of the victims, this kind of experiential view of the past became a guiding principle for me and inspired me to make the movie with a level of abstraction.

How did that insight change your perception of Willi Herold's character then?

To be honest: In a way the more I learned the less I understood, and I came to the conclusion that it's not about trying to analyse who the character of Willi Herold is or to apply terminologies from clinical psychology. Whenever I tried to put a name to it, it felt reductive, pat. I decided everybody needed to make up their own mind about who Willi Herold is and why he did what he did. There is an intentional blank spot at the centre of the character that allows the audience to find their own answers.

Did that idea change over the course of writing the script?

It crystallized but there is still something that startles me to the degree that I can't explain at all. What's happening in the world right now, sadly, is helping me understand how easily democracy can be subverted, used and abused. There are certain conditions required for atrocities and genocide to occur. It starts with the rhetoric. Dehumanize the opponents. Create a them against us situation. Then we are told that the rules of civilization no longer apply. Killing is OK. This goes hand in hand with the legitimization of crimes committed.

Would you call THE CAPTAIN in any way an authentic period film?

I am not a fan of the "fetishism of authenticity" which is a wonderful phrase German film critic Cristina Nord once used when she talked about how German films about the Nazi past have all essentially become the equivalent of British heritage movies. The fallacy is that if you get the costumes and the car details right, you get the time right. But since none of the people involved in making the film were alive at the time, and all we can do is to research and look at photos and films of the time and read up about it, this so-called recreation of reality is pure artifice. History is a look back from a specific present with its particular biases and preoccupations. I never wanted to pretend this wasn't the case. Of course, we got all the uniforms right since THE CAPTAIN is a movie about uniforms. But we took a lot of liberties with everything else. I wanted to make sure that there was a layer of abstraction in everything we did. Sets, acting, tone.

Talking about your cast: Making this film must have been quite a challenge for them, especially for your young main actor Max Hubacher. How did you prepare your actors for this very specific setting and how did you work with them?

I think a lot of it was set by the script. If you look at some movies that deal with violence, brutality and the darker side of humanity, most of them give you a little hole, through which you can escape - be it humour or be it the one character you can grab on to. My script didn't have any of that—it didn't let you off the hook. I think this idea was very clear to everyone involved when they read the script.

What kind of experience did the actors have during the shoot?

Every one of the actors fell apart at some point - mostly while we were shooting in the camp. Max Hubacher, who plays Willi Herold, went into shock when we shot his visit to the detention barracks, with all the prisoners present. Bernd Hölscher, who plays Schütte, started to cry after his character shoots the prisoners in the pit. We never showed them, but there were always people in the pit and I had instructed them to beg for their lives - some did it so successfully that after I said "Cut", Bernd Hölscher just started to weep. It was very hard for him to continue shooting that night. I went into shock a when Milan Peschel's character walked across the (invisible) dead bodies in the pit. It got us all at a certain point.

Did you rehearse much with your actors?

We did extensive rehearsals for several weeks. Neither the tone of the film nor the acting is naturalistic. We needed to calibrate the tone and the intentions to make sure that we didn't tilt too far into one or the other direction. The actors worked really, really hard to walk that line.

It's the first film you ever shot in black-and-white. What was the idea behind that decision?

There is a story that Martin Scorsese shot tests for RAGING BULL in colour and showed them to Michael Powell who said – I'm paraphrasing: "You cannot make this film with all its blood in colour, people won't be able to look past the blood, past the red. You need to make this film black-and-white!" This struck me as amazingly astute in terms of how audiences perceive violence in film and I thought: We have such a bloody tale here, I need people to somehow not be completely blocked and repelled. It was also an intuitive choice because I know the past mostly through black-and-white photographs. The third reason was aesthetics: I wanted the film to have an abstract quality. There is an intentional theatricality to the film and the black-and-white suited that better than colour.

You live and work both in the USA and in Germany. Do you expect audiences to react differently to your film?

It's hard to predict, but Germans haven't seen these kinds of characters in a German film. I think there is going to be a bit of a cognitive dissonance that American audiences for example might not experience. It's the same way that we watch 12 YEARS A SLAVE differently than Americans do. It's just a difference in culture.

Film information

Original title (German)	Der Hauptmann
English title	The Captain
Country of production	Germany, France, Poland
Year of production	2017
Running time	118 minutes
Color / B/W	BW
Format	Cinemascope
Category	Feature film
Original language	German
Subtitles	English
World Premiere	Toronto International Film Festival - Special Presentations

Credits

Cast

Max Hubacher	Herold
Milan Peschel	Freytag
Frederick Lau	Kipinski
Bernd Hölscher	Schütte
Waldemar Kobus	Hansen
Alexander Fehling	Junker
Britta Hammelstein	Gerda Schütte
Sascha Alexander Geršak	Sichner
Samuel Finzi	Roger Kuckelsberg
Wolfram Koch	Schneider
Marko Dyrlich	Brockhoff
Hendrik Arnst	Konteradmiral Weyher
Haymon Maria Buttinger	Dr. Kremer
Alexander Hörbe	Schnabel Wirt
Eugénie Anselin	Irmgard
Sebastian Rudolph	Gefreiter Paul
Blerim Destani	Dahler-Kaufmann

Crew

DoP	Florian Ballhaus, ASC
Production design	Harald Turzer
Concept Artist	Sasa Zivkovic
Costumes	Magdalena J. Rutkiewicz-Luterek
Editor	Michał Czarnecki
Music	Martin Todsharow
Casting	Anja Dührberg

Produced by
Filmgalerie 451, Alfama Films, Opus Film

Co-produced in collaboration with
Facing East, Worst Case Entertainment, hands-on producers, Maria Films

With the support of
Eurimages
Deutscher FilmförderFonds
Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung
Filmförderungsanstalt
Die Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Kunst und Medien
Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg
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Piotr Dziecioł
Ewa Puszczynska

Producers
Frieder Schlaich
Irene von Alberti

Full Cast and Credits:

www.filmgalerie451.de

About the Cast

Max Hubacher (Willi Herold)

Born in Bern, Switzerland in 1993. Started acting for children's theatre at the age of 7. Played in theatre productions at Schauspielhaus Zürich among others.

Awards: Swiss Film Prize (2012), EFP Shooting Star (2012)

Filmography (selection):

- Mario (2018), director: Marcel Gisler
- Drift (Driften) (2015), director: Karim Patwa
- A Decent Man (Nichts Passiert) (2015), director: Micha Lewinsky
- Night Train to Lisbon (2013), director: Bille August
- The Foster Boy (Der Verdingbub) (2011), director: Markus Imboden
- Bold Heroes (Stationspiraten) (2010), director: Mike Schaerer

Milan Peschel (Freitag)

Born in East-Berlin, German Democratic Republic in 1968. Studied acting at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts. Played in theatre productions at Volksbühne Berlin, Thalia Theater Hamburg, and Maxim Gorki Theater among others. Directed numerous theatre plays and has played in almost 60 film and TV productions.

Awards: Hessian TV Award (2010), German Film Award (2012), Bavarian Film Award (2012), German Screen Actors Award (2012),

Filmography (selection):

- Old Agent Men (Kundschafter des Friedens) (2017), director: Robert Thalheim
- The Manny (Der Nanny), (2016) director: Matthias Schweighöfer
- What a Man (2011), director: Matthias Schweighöfer
- Stopped on Track (Halt auf halber Strecke) (2011), director: Andreas Dresen
- Netto (2005), director: Robert Thalheim
- Hamlet_X (2003), director: Herbert Fritsch

Frederick Lau (Kipinski)

Born in Berlin, Germany in 1989. Started acting at the age of 10. Has played in nearly 90 productions.

Awards: Golden Sparrow (2005), Grimme-Preis (2011), Bavarian TV Award (2011), German Film Award (2008, 2015)

Filmography (selection):

- Gutland (2017), director: Govinda Van Maele
- 4 Blocks (TV series) (2017), director: Marvin Kren
- Victoria (2015), director: Sebastian Schipper
- Neue Vahr Süd (2010), director: Hermine Huntgeburth
- The Wave (Die Welle) (2008), director: Dennis Gansel
- Second Hand Child (Wer küsst schon einen Leguan?) (2005), director: Karola Hattop

Alexander Fehling (Junker)

Born in Berlin; Germany in 1981. Studied acting at the Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts. Played in theatre productions at Berliner Ensemble, Deutsches Theater, Maxim Gorki Theater, and Sophiensaele among others.

Awards: Young German Cinema Award (2007), Jupiter Award (2010), EFP Shooting Star (2011), Bavarian Film Award (2015)

Filmography (selection):

- Three Peeks (Drei Zinnen) (2017), director: Jan Zabeil
- Homeland (TV series) (2015), director: various
- Labyrinth of Lies (Im Labyrinth des Schweigens) (2014), director: Giulio Ricciarelli
- Young Goethe in Love (Goethe!) (2010), director: Philipp Stölzl
- Inglourious Basterds (2009), director: Quentin Tarantino
- And Along Come Tourists (Am Ende kommen Touristen) (2007), director: Robert Thalheim

Background information THE CAPTAIN

THE CAPTAIN was shot within 41 days. Principal photography took place between February and April 2017 near Wrocław, Poland and in and around Görlitz, Germany. Ironically termed "Görliwood", the small town Görlitz in East Germany with a population of under 60.000 has become a popular filming location for Hollywood productions in recent times, with films like Stephen Daldry's THE READER (2009), Quentin Tarantino's INGLORIOUS BASTERDS (2009) or Wes Anderson's THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL (2014) being shot here.

Since THE CAPTAIN is set during the last two weeks of World War II before the German surrender to the Soviet Union and the Western Allies in late April and early May 1945, and the film mostly consists of outdoor shots, it was important for the filmmakers to shoot during late winter and early spring as well.

Rehearsals with the actors started as early as summer 2016. Since the real-life character of Willi Herold was only 19 years old when he started his terror regime in 1945, it was crucial for Robert Schwentke to find a young actor that not only bore some resemblance to Herold but also looked young enough to fit the part. 23-year-old Swiss actor Max Hubacher who plays Willi Herold, already gained praise and won the Swiss film award at the age of 17 for his part in THE FOSTER BOY (DER VERDINGBUB, Markus Imboden 2011).

Popular German actor Alexander Fehling, who plays Nazi captain Junker (hunting Willi Herold in the beginning of the film) has been known to an international audience from his part in Quentin Tarantino's INGLORIOUS BASTERDS. He also plays the lead in THREE PEEKS (DREI ZINNEN, 2017) by Jan Zabeil which premiered at this year's Locarno Film Festival and is part of the line-up of this year's Toronto Film Festival in a Special Presentation.

Frederick Lau (Kipinski) has starred in the internationally acclaimed arthouse hits such as VICTORIA (Sebastian Schipper, 2015), A COFFEE IN BERLIN (OH BOY, Jan Ole Gerster, 2012) or THE COUNTESS (Julie Delpy, 2009). Milan Peschel (Freytag) starred as a family father diagnosed with a brain tumor in the highly acclaimed drama STOPPED ON TRACK (HALT AUF FREIER STRETCKE, Andreas Dresen, 2012) which was part of the 2011 competition programme in Cannes.

This is the 9th collaboration of DOP Florian Ballhaus (son of legendary German cinematographer Michael Ballhaus) and director Robert Schwentke. Their works includes THE FAMILY JEWELS (EIERDIEBE, 2003), FLIGHTPLAN (2005), THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE (2009), R.E.D. (2010), INSURGENT (2015), ALLEGIANT (2016) and THE CAPTAIN (2017).

Ballhaus also collaborated with Hollywood director David Frankel on such hit comedies such as SEX AND THE CITY (various episodes, 2003), THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA (2006), MARLEY & ME (2008) or HOPE SPRINGS (2012).

One of the main shooting locations, the work camp containing the barracks, was built in Poland especially for the film and then blown up in real time to simulate the bomb attack of the Allied Forces as realistically as possible. The VFX of the film were produced by the German CGI and VFX company Mackevision, which is based in Stuttgart. Mackevision worked on productions like INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE (Roland Emmerich, 2016) or the hit TV-show GAME OF THRONES among other things.

THE CAPTAIN is a German-Polish-French co-production with a budget 5.8 million Euro. It was financed by private investors and produced by Paulo Branco from Alfama Films (Paris), Piotr Dzięcioł and Ewa Puszczynska for Opus Film (Lodz), while the lion's share of the budget was provided by the German production company Filmgalerie 451 (Berlin) and producer Frieder Schlaich.

Willi Herold, a German life The true story behind THE CAPTAIN

The story of THE CAPTAIN is based in great parts on the real-life story of 19-year-old German soldier Willi Herold who turned into a con man and a sadistic despot after finding and wearing the uniform of a high rank officer in April 1945.

Willi Herold was born in 1925 in a small town near Chemnitz in the East of Germany and starts an apprenticeship as a chimney sweep before he is conscripted to join the Wehrmacht as a paratrooper in 1943. He fights in Italy before his brigade is deployed to serve in Germany.

On April 3 1945, only a few weeks before the end of the war, Herold is separated from his troops and finds himself alone in a German no-man's-land, making his way North towards the town of Bentheim. Inside a demolished army car, the young man finds an officer's box with a captain's uniform that is equipped with war decorations and a number of badges of the highest honour, among those the Iron Cross.

Herold begins to play the role of the captain, quickly making use of his new powers and soon becoming the commander of a group of soldiers he encounters on the way. The German expression for soldiers who had lost their brigade or were under other circumstances separated from their troops is "Versprengte", which can be translated as "scattered" or "dispersed". Towards the end of the war, hundreds of Versprengte were on the roads of Germany, as were deserters.

The amount of soldiers under Herold was estimated to have once been around 80 men, with a core group of 12 men remaining until the end. As depicted in the film, Herold could not identify himself according to the rank of his uniform when meeting another officer on the road, but got away only through his brazen, authoritarian and self-assured behaviour towards the real captain.

In the Emsland, a sparsely populated area in the North-West of Germany, the Nazis had erected a total of 15 detention camps, 6 of which were exclusively for members of the Wehrmacht who were either deserters or being accused of insubordination, corroding the troops or other misdemeanours. Herold and his men arrive at Camp II, the detention camp Aschendorfermoor, on April 11, 1945.

Against the organisational structure of the camp and initially against the will of its superintendent, Herold and his men install a completely arbitrary summary court of their own, justifying their cruel murders and random executions with the lie of having orders from Adolf Hitler himself. Despite the lack of (written) proof, all officers believe him.

On April 12 1945, Herold and his men ask inmates to dig a 1,80-meter-deep pit and begin executing them with an anti-aircraft gun. Later they would use machine guns to kill the soldiers, push them into the pit throw hand grenades into the hole. By the end of the night, 98 soldiers were executed. The mad atrocities of Herold's drumhead trials even exceeded the deeds shown in the film and included drowning inmates, body-stripping and chasing down deserters.

Between April 15 and 18, Herold and his men reorganise the camp completely, sending soldiers back to the Wehrmacht and accepting others into their group. On April 19, Allied Forces bomb the barracks and destroy the camp completely. Herold and his men continue their killing spree on their way to the small town of Papenburg. Their terror regime includes a public hanging, the execution of alleged spies and the killing of a farmer hissing the white flag of surrender.

On April 28, Herold is finally arrested by the German military police. During his time in jail, the

Red Army reaches Berlin and Hitler commits suicide. Herold confesses his deeds but is let go by the tribunal. When Herold is asked to join "Operation Werewolf" one of the last Nazi plans to form resistance against the allies, Herold escapes to Wilhelmshaven. Ironically, he is caught by a British marine soldier while stealing a loaf of bread and his story is eventually revealed and presented to a British military court. Willi Herold is sentenced to death on August 29 1946. Herold and five other men are killed by guillotin. He was 20 years old.

Willi Herold would later be known as the "Hangman of the Emsland" ("Henker vom Emsland"). He had killed almost 170 people.

Paul Meyer and Rudolf Kersting made a documentary film about Willi Herold called „Der Hauptmann von Muffrika“ in 1996 („The Captain of Muffrika“, Muffrika being a racist analogy of the vast, bleak and musty Emsland to the no-man’s-land of the countrysides of „Africa“).

T. X. H. Pantcheff wrote a book about the story of Willi Herold in 1993 called „Der Henker vom Emsland. Willi Herold, 19 Jahre alt. Ein deutsches Lehrstück“ („The Hangman of the Emsland. Willi Herold, 19 years old. A German lesson.“), later called „Der Henker vom Emsland: Dokumentation einer Barbarei am Ende des Krieges 1945“ („The Hangman of the Emsland: the documentation of a barbarity at the end of the war 1945“).

Nazi perpetrator, center-stage

by Olaf Möller

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

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

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

Willi Herold is also a man more calculating and ruthless characters like Kipinski might attach themselves to, the same way that more hapless and helpless types like Freytag try to stay out of harm's way in his company.

Maybe Willi Herold was a psychopath – maybe he was just a man of his time. What he was not, is an exception, a singular occurrence, for there were more than 400 cases of crimes in nature (if not necessarily in scale) similar to those committed by Herold and his flying drumhead. Willi Herold is a character most decidedly worthy of our attention.

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

The earliest important example of a war movie set during the first months of 1945 is probably Paul May's **08/15 at Home** (08/15 in der Heimat, 1955), which is the final chapter of a vastly successful trilogy. The film follows (fictive) Wehrmacht PFC Herbert Asch throughout World War II, starting at basic training and ending in the chaos of early 1945. German

audiences would understand that the main character's name is an ironic corruption of the German word "Arsch" (meaning: arse), as PFC "Arse" was a common term for the ordinary soldier, meaning the millions of men every armed force's corps is made of. In short: Asch was *the* German World War II soldier. In **08/15 at Home**, Herbert Asch is anticipating the end of the war, tired of fighting, while trying to prevent some Nazis from going underground with a treasure of platinum. Asch is a decent guy, just like one of his commanding officers who doesn't fight captivity during the US-American occupation. He assumes responsibility for his deeds and accepts his failure both as a soldier and a citizen. In that respect **08/15 at Home** is the complete opposite of **The Captain**. In Paul May's film, there is good and bad, always clearly separated. In Robert Schwentke's film, evil comes in all shades, some of which might have their useful or even helpful aspects. In Paul May's film, the crime is spectacular and singular, in Robert Schwentke's film, it's manifold, ranging from the petty to the outrageously horrible.

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

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

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

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

The two closest relatives for **The Captain**, both similarly based on true crimes, are again to be found in 50s German cinema: Helmut Käutner's comedy with melancholic linings, **The Captain from Köpenick** (*Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*, 1956) and Robert Siodmak's

The Devil Strikes at Night (Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam, 1957). **The Captain from Köpenick** shows another common man who puts on a captain's uniform – only that cobbler Wilhelm Voigt is a loveable fellow and a petty criminal whose con exposes Prussia's militaristic-authoritarian heart in all its ridiculous absurdity. **The Devil Strikes at Night**, then, was the lone local example of a war noir: Siodmack details the hunt for a serial killer whose existence the Nazis want to cover up, even if that means getting rid of the cop investigating the case.

Willi Herold also exposes the absurdities of bureaucracy, and how to best abuse them, which ends not in laughter but in a mass grave. Befitting this tale of homicidal fury, **The Captain** looks like a film noir storyboarded by Flemish woodcut artist Frans Masereel: all expressionistic angles, trance-like acting, many an eerie silence blown up by sudden splashes of acidic humour, with the occasional stab of a gruesome and wise surrealism. When during the punk-fuelled final credits, Willi Herold and his merry band of mass murderers wreck symbolic havoc in a small town in present-day Germany and play pranks on perplexed passers-by, something long suppressed in German film history finally breaks free.

Historical research has long shown how easily people from each walk of life, class and stratum could succumb to the darkness of war and become part of a mass murdering detail, be turned into torturers and killers, rob and rape, or just take advantage of other people's willingness to do all this and worse. With the story of Willi Herold in **The Captain**, German cinema finally acknowledges the true horror of war: human frailty, and a will for indifference when it comes to the suffering of other human beings.