

# **Generation Mini-Series: Contemporary German Historical Event-Television and the Implications of its Interactive Elements**

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There has been a great deal of public and scholarly discussion about the aesthetics, reception patterns, and emotional appeal of German historical television over the past ten years, a discourse that intensified recently in response to the controversial 2012 ZDF mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*. Created by the same TeamWorx/BetaFilm producer/writer team of Nico Hofmann and Stefan Kolditz who brought the popular romantic melodrama *Dresden* to the small screen in 2006, the three-part series directed by Phillip Kadelbach immediately drew both praise and condemnation for the way it mobilized the private qualities of television—in particular the fact that home viewing could inspire immediate familial interactions—to induce the public and political process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in formats and venues unique to the twenty-first century public sphere. Garnering an impressively large audience of over 7.2 million viewers in a nation with a population of just under 82 million, it engendered heated international debate in response to its bold self-presentation not just as entertainment made from a German point-of-view, but also as a positive opportunity for collective self-reflection, intergenerational dialogue, and national reconciliation with little apology to those whose sides of history it did not attend as closely or accurately to (Cohen-Pfister; Hall; Kapczynski).

The series fit the bill as an example of what media historian Tobias Ebbrecht, in a pair of articles analyzing a shift in media culture observed during the public commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II in 2005, had dubbed “historical event television” (Ebbrecht “Docudramatizing History on TV” and “History, Public Memory and Media Event”). Ebbrecht introduced the nomenclature into the scholarly dialogue to distinguish a new tendency in mass media memory culture from the already familiar categories of docudrama, heritage film, and historical melodrama. He borrowed the label from controversial German television historian and author Guido Knopp, whose proclamation in a *Potsdamer Neueste Nachrichten* interview seven years earlier Ebbrecht translated as: “I believe that the genre of the docu-drama is the future. We know so many stories behind the scenes which are not filmed. If we combine this—viewable for the spectator—with historical footage, a new genre of historical event-television will be founded that can give a new perspective on historical events” (qtd. in Ebbrecht “History, Memory and Public Event” 221). Whatever one might think of Knopp’s brand of popular, non-academic televisual history, one cannot help but be struck by his self-presentation as a prognosticator of sorts, commenting with authority on the narrative structures and media forms that would capture the future public’s attention and maintain or renew interest in revisiting the past, especially the problematic history of World War II and the Holocaust.

Knopp spoke in 1998 not so much as one who could see into the future, but rather as one who had enough control over the means of media production to make that prediction come true. As the head of the department of *Zeitgeschichte* at ZDF, Germany's second public television station, from 1981 to 2013, Knopp was behind such dramatic features and documentaries as *Hitler—eine Bilanz*, *Hitlers Helfer*, *Hitlers Frauen*, *Holocaust* (sic), *Die Große Flucht*, *Der Jahrhundertkrieg*, *Die SS*, *Die Gefangenen*, *Sie wollten Hitler töten*, *Das Drama von Dresden*, *Die Wehrmacht—eine Bilanz*, *Goodbye DDR*, *Unsere Besten* and *Weltenbrand* ("ZDF Historiker geht in Rente"). When he announced his plans for retirement at the end of 2012, commentators across Germany concurred that, for better or for worse, he was in large part responsible for shifting the tone and style of historical television in a revisionist direction that both exploited and reaffirmed increased attention to everyday life, a more unified sense of a positive collective national community, and an empathetically inquisitive attitude toward the past experiences of ordinary Germans—a trend coincident with such events as the original *Wehrmachtausstellung* in 1995 and the publication of Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall's *'Opa war kein Nazi': Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* in 2002.

Throughout his career, Knopp made calculated interventions that seemed to respond and adapt to the popular and academic reactions to such groundbreaking television events as the German broadcast of the NBC mini-series *Holocaust* in 1979 (the year after he began working at ZDF), Edgar Reitz's homegrown *Heimat* in 1984, and the subsequent heritage films running in cinemas. He took full advantage of what Anton Kaes theorized in the early 1990's as film and television's role as "the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness" (309). Knopp and his collaborators were keenly observant of shifts in the way the public interacted with historical facts and narratives through new media, both in Germany and abroad. At the time of the interview in 1998, he had an eye on mobile video recording and the evolution of Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation with its mission to make "audio-visual interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides a compelling voice for education and action" (*USC Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education*). Through remembrance projects that would come to assume such time-bending names as "Auschwitz: The Past is Present" and "Past Forward," the Shoah Foundation offered the inspiration to record, reproduce, and disseminate witness testimony to make German history come alive in the present moment and preserve memories for the future and to, as Kaes has formulated it, socialize memory through technology in new ways (310).

By that time, Knopp's contemporary history department at ZDF had already recorded and cataloged over 1600 individual recollections of significant events in German history to use in their documentaries and panel discussions. In 2006, Hans-Ulrich Jörges, a chief editor at *Stern* magazine, joined Knopp in expanding on this archive by forming a not-for-profit organization in Mainz under the name *Unsere Geschichte. Das Gedächtnis der Nation*. It was their intention to combine the existing archive with new interviews and to prepare the collection for distribution to the public through the latest media channels, including the relatively new publicly curated platform of YouTube. A range of administrative structures were created to guide this work, including a *Vorstand*, a *Wissenschaftlicher Vorrat* and a *Kuratorium*. Membership in this elaborate bureaucracy would come to include the Minister President of Rheinland-Pfalz, the director of the

Memorial to the German Resistance, a number of university historians (including Dr. Harald Welzer) and such German household names as *Stasi*-archive founder Dr. Joachim Gauck and celebrity literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki (*Gedächtnis der Nation*). They all served under the patronage of *Schirmherr*, Bundespräsident Christian Wulff. In 2011, the *Gedächtnis der Nation* (GdN) team acquired a vehicle they named the “Jahrhundertbus,” which set out for various locations around Germany to reach subjects outside the studio setting, beginning with journeys along the course of the former Berlin Wall. Additional busses and destinations all over the country were added as time passed. Corporate and foundation sponsorship came from such German marquee brands as not only ZDF and *Stern*, but also Bertelsmann, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, Daimler, and Gruner + Jahr publishing, as well as Google and YouTube with their platforms for data and video collection, management and access (“Unsere Geschichte—Das Gedächtnis der Nation”). Private donations were solicited to cover the remainder of the projected cost of two million Euros for the first four years (Trumpf).

Coverage of the *Gedächtnis der Nation* initiative emphasized its democratic and participatory dimensions, as well as its unprecedented potential to increase the storage capacity of Germany’s memory banks. The cleverly designed logo of two stacked speech bubbles forming the letter “g” reminded at least one journalist not only of the theme of dialogue, but also of the second rounded “g” in Google’s logo typeface, prior to the sans-serif redesign in 2015 (Trumpf). Phrases such as “universal accessibility,” “collective ownership,” “living history,” and “interactivity” were contrasted with the perceived shortcomings of traditional historical archive and its purportedly inert content made inaccessible by gate-keeping, supervisory institutions (Oberbeck; Trumpf). Germans were encouraged to record and submit their own recollections or those of their family members and to supplement, illustrate, narrate and edit their own videos using the material in the *Gedächtnis der Nation* archive and to submit them through a so-called *Mitmachkanal* on YouTube (Trumpf; Warnecke). Even those who, in the discourse of the coverage, were thought of as standing on the sidelines of history (*Außenstehende*) were offered the promise to participate in bringing the past to life for the present and determining how it would be remembered in the future (Warnecke). Consumers cum amateur historians cum citizens were now purportedly free to consume interviews and historical footage on their own time, day or night, and on their own terms.

In the same year as the interview revealing the germ of the elaborately bureaucratized and diversely sponsored *Gedächtnis der Nation* project, prolific television producers Nico Hofmann and Ariane Krampe joined together with Wolf Bauer, managing director of UFA, to form their own large-scale production company, TeamWorx. Its purpose was to produce high-quality television movies and fiction programming, specializing in shows and series that would not only feed off of debates and discussions about twentieth-century German history, but which could be marketed as attention-worthy “events” in their own right. Like Knopp and his team, Hofmann and his group collaborated actively with the Bertelsmann conglomerate. In addition, they benefitted from an alliance with television heavyweight Jan Mojto’s distribution companies EOS Entertainment and Beta Film, which provided TeamWorx’s epic tales of historic heroicism with a domestic reach that exceeded that of the similarly oriented “cinema of consensus” identified and theorized by Eric Rentschler in 2000. Before being completely absorbed into the single media brand UFAFiction in stages between 2013-2015, TeamWorx had released well

over one hundred melodramatic historical movies and mini-series portraying events ranging from the expulsion of ethnic Germans from eastern territories, the bombing of Dresden, the autobiographical writings of artists facing moral compromise under the Swastika, and the experiences of Wehrmacht soldiers on the eastern front at the end of World War II. Broadcast on German television, most prominently on ARD, ZDF, and MDR, and released on DVD and VOD internationally, titles like *Dresden* (2006), *Die Flucht* (2007), and *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* reached peak audiences of over ten million on their premiere nights.

Film historian Paul Cooke has cited a *Variety* article that makes clear that the aspirational associations raised by the company name were no accident; he quotes Jan Mojto as proclaiming: “We will be the DreamWorks of Europe” (Cooke 282). In other words, at the same historical moment when Knopp laid the foundations of a German national archive to parallel the public memory project inspired by Steven Spielberg’s experiences researching, shooting, and publicly discussing *Schindler’s List* (1993), Hofmann and his collaborators set out to make narrative movies with a similar degree of dramatic power and sense of historical authenticity as that feature film and others by the popular American auteur. Born out of a common culture of consensus and normalization, *Gedächtnis der Nation* and TeamWorx shared an agenda that emphasized continuity in the transmission of history, empathetic viewing, and listening to personal stories, and the preservation of a common past that unites a nation. Knopp’s project aimed to record and share participant and witness experiences for the edification of those who followed; Hofmann’s aimed to move and entertain the second and third generations through narratives inspired by such first-hand testimonies. Consistent with the broader normalization trend, their attention shifted from the crimes of the Holocaust to the fate of the German population as a whole in a move that reconciled Germany’s relationship to its past and claimed the country’s right to be represented and treated as a modern democracy like any other in NATO and the European Union.

While Knopp (however popular) has long been under fire for what critics have called his brand of “*Histotainment*” at best, and “*Geschichtspornographie*” at worst, criticism of Hofmann and TeamWorx has been more scholarly in tone and origin. For example, Paul Cooke has argued that, although a wide variety of formats of historical television in Germany have proliferated since the emergence of private, commercial channels in the 1980s (diversifying to broadcast dramatic reenactments, narrated documentaries, restored and recolored footage, and docudramas that combine documentary modes with feature film narratives), they are all of a piece as “diverse modes of the same historical event-television” (“History, Public Memory and Media Event 226). Laurel Cohen-Pfister has argued that *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, like its predecessors, oscillates between the sometimes conflicting priorities of teaching regrettable facts about history to generations who will live on after witnesses and participants are gone and appealing emotionally to those younger generations to encourage them to empathize with and listen openly to the first generation. She demonstrates through her close analysis of the fictional drama’s aesthetics of authenticity and emotion and its promotion of a positively inflected collective viewing experience that its “representational intent is to enable understanding . . . outside categories of right or wrong.” Further, she charges, “A look at the memory politics behind *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* indicates that its intended representation of a collective German memory is neither collective nor memory, rather it is a consciously

constructed subjective representation of the mindset and feelings of the war generation, whose true thoughts and feelings can only be surmised” (119).

Knopp’s and Hofmann’s media ventures have accomplished their goals through such mutually beneficial textual strategies as hybridity, dramatization, emotional appeal, and extra-textual features including multiple media channels and interactivity. These combined to actualize “historical event-television” as quasi-forecasted by Knopp in 1998. *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* represents its apotheosis. Rather than merely marking the occasion of the beginning of the Third Reich, the mini-series was ready-made to provoke public conversations about processes of transferring memories of Nazism in Germany and abroad. Transcending traditional media, it was preceded, paralleled and followed by hundreds of previews, making-of videos, reviews, profiles, feature stories, as well as broadcasts and transcripts of public dialogues—all of which could be accessed just as easily on-line as off. Related documentaries, old and new, were cross-programmed on the publicly funded stations and internet platforms of ZDF and ARD, as well as on their collaborative news and information extension, Phoenix (the latter being new home to Guido Knopp, who had not gone into full retirement after all).

ZDF also released a number of collateral interactive digital media tie-in’s that reinforced the intended connection between younger viewing audiences and a romanticized vision of the experiences of the war generation. *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* functioned as part of a broader convergence culture (in the language of media theorist Henry Jenkins) that grew and expanded to help win over audiences nationally and globally. A motion picture comic offering background information on the main characters could be downloaded in the form of an app through the iTunes store; Facebook groups and channels provided a forum for responding to curated and carefully timed official posts; the network also actively encouraged extra-textual engagement with the series with references and links to the *Gedächtnis der Nation* YouTube channels on the series homepage. These cross-platform interfaces went beyond mediating events of the past for the present as literature, cinema, and television had done in the past; they converged with those earlier cultural forms to provide a more engaging, present-day experience geared to the attention spans and tastes of the digital generation.

As mentioned above, it has been argued that such advances in new media, especially the *Gedächtnis der Nation* channels on YouTube, have the potential to democratize the historiographic project in Germany. The influx of previously unseen, crowd-sourced imagery promises to counteract the over-circulation of a small body of images that have populated the “post-memory” historical imagination (Hirsch). Sounds and images posted online can be poached and repurposed by creative and critical consumers (Jenkins). One might also contend that the multitude of interactive platforms through which audiences can engage with and respond to the dramatic content and historical background facts of shows such as *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* resemble Benjaminian labyrinths wherein media consumers can explore history through contingency, accident, and free-association, in spaces outside traditional hierarchies of logic and causality. Perhaps new media hold the key to defying what Anton Kaes has criticized as the “all-encompassing, homogenizing power of mass media and their control over public memory” (Kaes 320).

But arguments dispelling this promise are just as compelling. Although the transmedial story elements might allow viewers to learn about and relate to history in multi-faceted and self-directed ways, they also reinforce an aesthetic of emotional affect,

strong character identification, authenticity and realism, sentimentality and narrative cohesion. The videos introducing the *Gedächtnis der Nation* project on its main web page display evocative cuts, iconic references, sweeping music, flow between color and black-and-white footage, and authoritative voiceover similarly to Knopp's televisual docudramas and TeamWorx' historical event-television features. The clips recorded in the *Jahrhundertbus* are staged in the dramatic contrast lighting that journalist Steffen Trumpf describes as, "Guido-Knopp-typischen Halbdunkel." The crowd-sourced video project is discursively framed in a prescriptive, albeit youthfully informal, language that privileges conventional modes of storytelling with its emphasis on suspense and emotional affect. Introductory videos and instructional copy on the website draw in prospective contributors with such invocations as, "Ihr kennt jemand, der eine spannende Geschichte hat? Dann macht mit. Ihr braucht dazu zwei Dinge. Eine Kamera und eine Zeitzeugin mit einer bewegenden Geschichte" ("Eure Geschichte auf YouTube!"). Convergence culture historiography is thus stylistically homogenized.

In concert with the TeamWorx fictionalized television dramas and Knopp's emotionally powerful documentaries, *Gedächtnis der Nation* treats witnesses and bystanders as protagonists and reduces the complex forces of history to elements of a storyline (Ebbrecht "History, Public Memory and Media Event" 223-5). The official YouTube blog that heralded the premiere of the *Gedächtnis der Nation* platform lauded, "Memory of Nations' (sic), provides more than a traditional historical archive. Thousands of prominent and ordinary people are being interviewed, and their personal accounts turn abstract history into real, emotional experiences" (Oberbeck). Treating the subjects of history as protagonists has the benefit of evoking feelings of solidarity in those who follow, but the drawback of extending that solidarity to those who were perpetrators under totalitarian regimes. The second and third generations are instructed to approach all members of the first with empathy and understanding for the sake of the larger archiving project. All witnesses and participants are presented as equally worthy; criticism and confrontation are discouraged. The children of Nazis, who so famously reflected on and expressed their sense of inherited guilt in the era of the New German Cinema, are exonerated through their participation in the crucial final hour effort to collect testimony before those who lived through the Nazi era and the founding of the BRD and DDR pass away. The fact that the crowd-sourcing project relies on the initiative of volunteer contributors further dulls its confrontational edge. Knopp himself admitted that perpetrators very rarely come forth to speak (Warnecke). The *Gedächtnis der Nation* project thus accomplishes something quite at odds with, for example, R.W. Fassbinder's contribution to the New German Cinema collaboration *Deutschland im Herbst* of 1977.

Together TeamWorx, ZDF and the *Gedächtnis der Nation* enterprise mobilize new media in service of the normalization process, which has its advantages and its disadvantages. If as Cooke has argued, historical event-television proves that "Germany...can at last become a 'normal' nation, able to join the rest of Europe in its empathetic understanding human suffering" (294) then the introduction of Facebook, iTunes, Google, and YouTube to their arsenal of collateral platforms implies that Germany is similar and connected to, rather than different or separate from, other contemporary societies that use these same media to share the stories that form their imagined communities. Knopp and Hofmann are quite cognizant of the prominent role they play in creating, reproducing and disseminating German-centered multi-medial

narratives that redirect national and transnational conversations about tragic historical events. They have branded themselves as the masters of mastering the past. That given, it is not unproblematic that TeamWorx now produces its epic historical products under the historically burdened UFA moniker—a point that deserves further consideration (“Teamworx gibt es nicht mehr”).

In our era of media convergence, questions of intellectual and creative property become even more legally and ethically complex. Just as Anton Kaes asserted over two decades ago, “History itself, so it seems, has been democratized by these easily accessible images, but the power over what is shared as public memory has passed into the hands of those who produce these images. No wonder a struggle has erupted over the production, administration, and control of public memory” (309). Sönke Neitzel, an historian who often works with Knopp, remarked in a 2011 newspaper article that universities could never afford to conduct as many interviews as Knopp and his team can (Warnecke). Nor could state archives or libraries store and maintain as many. The historiographic mandate has shifted, at least in part, toward corporations, media giants, and private entities. That mandate includes editorial authority; videos uploaded to the *Gedächtnis der Nation* YouTube site are posted only after having been inspected and cleared for appropriateness. While it is commendable that hate speech, defamation, and utter inaccuracies would be kept out of circulation, it is concerning to read that user content, in the words of journalist Tilmann Warnecke, is regularly “von zeithistorisch geschulten Redakteuren aufbereitet werden.” It is hard to discern who those experts are, what their precise standards are and what work might be done on voluntary submissions. The over twenty paragraphs of fine print on the project website regarding privacy and data collection terms, including cookies, copyright, and the participation of minors beg for their own critical analysis (“Datenschutz”).

Long before Facebook, iTunes, Google, and YouTube, Thomas Elsaesser warned that, “there can be little doubt that in the current reorganization of delivery systems and the ownership of the film, television, newspaper and publishing industries more is at stake than the profits to be made out of entertainment and culture” (304). Drawing on essays and films by Alexander Kluge, he called attention to the “industrialization of consciousness” by mainstream media narratives and the official discourses they support. Henry Jenkins has argued that convergence culture is not predestined to colonize the minds and behaviors of consumers with reductive narration, stereotyping, or consensus. He makes a convincing case that the participatory side of new media can encourage active critique and the production of off-center perspectives, resistant counter-narratives, and experimental aesthetics. Jaimie Baron’s articulation of the potential of the “archive effect” to defy the conventionally reifying effect of including historical footage in popular culture texts is especially useful for thinking through what an alternative digital historiography can look like. Holding that promise as a standard, the experience of surfing through materials related to *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* and the *Gedächtnis der Nation* pages and video channels does not live up to the archeological digging of Gabi Teichert (the anchoring character in Kluge’s 1979 *Die Patriotin*) and her confrontation with contradictory and incomplete traces, scraps, fragments, and vestiges of history. In order to fulfill its critical potential, transmedial storytelling must draw attention, in a Brechtian fashion, to the constructedness of its elements and their embeddedness in the preexisting power dynamics of narrative in all forms. Digital historiography is at its best

when it draws upon disruptive and challenging techniques inherited from epic theater and counter-cinema (including the essay film and expanded cinema). This requires a strong command of an analog past that will be increasingly marginalized in a corporatized world that privileges the virtual, the spectacular, and the present. But researchers and scholars must continue to shine light on the margins, for what Kaes argued toward the end of the twentieth-century remains just as true as we progress through the beginning of the twenty-first: “In today’s media culture hope comes from the margins” (321).

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