Depravity at Sea

*Das Boot* and the Challenge of Coming to Terms with the Past

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ABSTRACT

At the end of World War II Germany was faced with an identity crisis that would permeate the succeeding decades and strongly influence the question of what it means to be German. This crisis revolved around the Germans' collaboration with the National Socialist regime between 1933 and 1945. Despite attempts by the Allies to institute a top-down formula of denazification, no program was able to impose Vergangenheitsbewältigung (the process of coming to terms with the past), and Germany experienced years of collective amnesia, in which the Second World War was a taboo topic, and avoided at all costs. The impetus for such a process would have to come from within Germany, however, and did so in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, as German youth began questioning their parents about the war and their roles in it.

I argue that Das Boot, a novelization of a submarine's patrol at sea, was a symptom of the gradual conservative shift that occurred over the course of the 1970s, and contributed to the collective denial of guilt and re-definition of the German soldier as a victim that reappeared in the 1970s after a period of submersion. Both the novel (Lothar-Günther Buchheim 1973) and the movie (Dir. Wolfgang Petersen 1981) versions contrasted sharply with the assertions of veterans who extolled their heroism and the glory of war. In opposition to this myth of heroism, Das Boot depicted the German submariner as a victim of both the Allies, against whom he hardly stood a chance, and of the Nazi High Command, which sent them to war without consideration for their lives.

I examine how both versions of the story disassociate their protagonists from the Nazi ideology in order to define them as separate entities and avoid having to come to terms with the full measure of their guilt. Both works additionally display their conservative, militaristic roots
through their interpretations of masculinity and its relation to technology and violence. Petersen’s film employs a militaristic interpretation of masculinity, but only in his objectification of the male body, and the subordination of the individual to work as a small cog in the machine and carry out one’s duty. Buchheim’s text, on the other hand, exhibits a violently sexual masculinity that predominated in fascist Germany. His descriptions of masculine symbols are accompanied by graphic scenes of sex and rape, indicating his abiding need for his masculinity to subjugate the feminine in order to assert his dominance and achieve the sexual pleasure that he cannot acquire anywhere outside of combat. This form of masculinity that Buchheim displays indicates a disturbing attraction to violent sexuality, and betrays an ideological connection to the Third Reich that drastically alters the context of his novel. In light of his history as a Nazi propagandist, Buchheim’s vehement denigration of the National Socialist government begins to appear more to assuage his nagging guilt, than to honestly depict the traumatic lives of the men who served in the “iron wolves.” Das Boot is a story that attempts to address the German issue of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, but ultimately falls short, settling for a rewriting of history, rather than a true confrontation of German guilt.
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INTRODUCTION

The submarine has held a unique position in German mythology of the 20th century. Perhaps no other weapon has so strongly influenced perceptions of Germany, both domestically and internationally, as the U-Boot. Feared and often loathed by the sailors of Allied nations during World Wars I and II, the U-Boat held a special position of reverence in Germany for those who were unable to relinquish the glory of Germany’s military and imperial ambitions.

Decades of literature from World War I until the 1980s indicate a fascination with submarines and the men who went to sea in them for months at a time. While some of this literature was critical and analytical, much of it centered around the heroic captains who lost their lives serving Germany and the need for more young men to take up the call to duty in the elite unit of submariners. Others portrayed the submariners as innocent children, manipulated and coerced into their positions, and deserving only of pity as victims. The film Das Boot (1981), directed by Wolfgang Petersen and based upon a novel of the same name by Lothar-Günther Buchheim, unfortunately falls mostly into the third category.

Despite being released at the end of the cinematic era known as “New German Cinema,” the film did not embody the characteristics of those lower budget films that generally challenged the complacent filmmaking of previous years and forced debate and discussion of themes that had lain dormant for years in cinema. Das Boot instead oriented itself conservatively, and was almost ahead of its time in returning to the older post-war depiction of German soldiers as victims of the Third Reich. Both the film and the book were symptoms of a worrying conservative trend that began to grow in Germany and America in the 1970s, before expanding significantly in the 1980s that sought to vindicate the German soldier entirely of all culpability and brand him as a victim, rather than a perpetrator. This shift
indicated a general desire to move on and forget the past, rather than deal directly with it, as if trying to disregard World War II as simply the responsibility of Adolf Hitler were an effective means of coming to terms with the guilt associated with it.

Since the release of both the novel and the film, few scholars have critically analyzed Das Boot in the context of post-war German socio-politics, and those who have done so have cast both versions of the story in an unflinchingly positive light. Naval historian, Michael Hadley, provides perhaps the most comprehensive discussion of German literature surrounding U-boats, and he finds that "Das Boot (1973) is undeniably the finest piece of fiction in U-boat literature."1 This classification does have merit, as Buchheim’s writing is unquestionably fervent and evocative, and although his authoritativeness in the realm of submarine warfare is disputable, many ex-submariners have attested that his novel realistically depicts a U-boat patrol.2 David G. Thompson describes Buchheim’s novel as a response to the “heroic myth” that was prevalent among veterans after World War Two, and that it “challenges the reader to consider some difficult questions about the conduct and responsibility of military men, both leaders and subordinates.”3 All of these assertions are true, but they also neglect to include Buchheim’s blatant promotion of fascist masculinity. His frequent use of gendered images to evoke scenes of sexual release and rape in violence indicate his own subscription to that culture of masculinity, which promotes violence as a form of sexual fulfillment, with the subjugation of the female “other” as the ultimate goal.

2 Ibid.
Both Hadley and Thompson also describe Buchheim’s victimization of soldiers as a positive, realistic advance from the previously held “heroic myth.” However, they fail to analyze the ways in which this victimization still avoids the submariners’ accountability for their actions in the war in support of the Nazi regime. Buchheim portrays only one, unlikable character as an ideological National Socialist, and his refusal to realistically depict the Nazi crew of the submarine ultimately circumvents the task of coming to terms with the past, because he simply replaces one myth with another: that of the German submariner as a hero, for that of the German submariner as an unwilling victim.

Hadley also discusses the film’s position in submarine literature, as it evoked just as much controversy as Buchheim’s novel. He describes the reception of Das Boot (1981) and the negative critiques that it received both from those on the left, who felt that the film did not take enough of an anti-war stance, and those on the right, who felt that it ignored “the deep and abiding sense of honour, patriotism, and duty, with which submariners had fought – and lost.”

Thompson mostly ignores the film version of Das Boot, except in his discussion of the technical innovations with which Petersen translated Das Boot from the page to the screen.

Das Boot also reflected the general trend in Germany towards militarization as a result of the increasing Cold War tensions through its portrayals of masculinity and technology. Instead of portraying the soldiers as individuals who chose to combine their efforts to a common purpose, the film provides only simplified, one-dimensional caricatures, which exist only as pieces in a machine, thereby avoiding judgment. Petersen had a substantial opportunity with Das Boot to address the German submariner’s role in World War II, and the ethical quandary of using Nazi

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4 Michael Hadley. Popular Image. 150.
submariners as protagonists in an honest and forthcoming way that may have done some good in the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (roughly translated as the process of coming to terms with the past).

Even more disturbing than the heavily sanitized, simplified film, however, were the fascist themes that were pervasive in the book, upon which the movie was based. Buchheim, a former propagandist for the Third Reich repeatedly used violently sexual terms in order to describe warfare, essentially turning war into a sexual fantasy and a release of sexual tension that was otherwise impossible. This equation of killing and sexual stimulation indicated a worrisome lingering of militaristic, fascist masculinity that rematerialized during the tensions and heightened militarization of the Cold War. Buchheim’s endorsement and use of that violent and misogynistic symbolism betrays an adherence to a dangerous philosophy on war and masculinity, in which many Germans still strongly believed.

Both the novel and film versions of Das Boot are evidence of the ease with which entire strata of society can choose to collectively forget its history. Despite strong left-wing movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s that forced the World War Two Generation to discuss its past and face its involvement with National Socialism, revising and rewriting World War Two and the Holocaust to portray the German soldiers as victims became politically acceptable, not only in Germany, but internationally as well. Buchheim’s novel and Petersen’s movie did provide strong opposing voices to Admiral Karl Dönitz and other veterans who still portrayed themselves as heroes, even decades after the war, but their contributions to the discussion amounted to the exchange of one myth for another. Although Buchheim and Petersen did not depict their characters as proud heroes, they chose instead to remove all Nazi identification from their
characters and portray them as victims of the Nazi regime. This policy of forgetfulness allowed former soldiers to avoid confronting their own past because it shifted the blame to those who had commanded them, making them (in their minds) guiltless. This reinterpretation was dangerous, as it completely halted the process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and allowed former Nazi soldiers and their families to look back on the Second World War as a horrible mistake, in which they suffered as much as anyone else instead of forcing them to come to terms with their own personal, familial or national identity that had allowed such abhorrent crimes to occur. Their decision to redefine themselves as victims, as they had directly after the war, indicated a deep-seated fear of self-reflection and the truths that they might have discovered in the process. Identification with the victims of National Socialism may have seemed logical, given the suffering that so many Germans endured during World War II, but it was ultimately a tactic of forgetfulness or selective memory to avoid confronting a recent history of untempered violence and misogyny.

NEW GERMAN CINEMA

The film Das Boot embodied a style of filmmaking that directly contrasted with New German Cinema by succumbing to large-budget Hollywood film tactics and utilizing action and special effects to tell a story instead of plot exposition, character development, and critical dialogue. Das Boot's popularity in Germany and in the United States showed how pervasive Hollywood movies had become in German culture, and how many viewers were entirely content to enjoy mindless action and tension, rather than watch a film that forced them to engage in serious self-reflection. Although New German Film was the source of many films still shown in
film courses as representative of German filmmaking, it was far more of a fringe movement due to the popularity of American films. Despite Hollywood's unavoidable influence on films and filmmakers all over the world, most New German Cinema filmmakers--initially committed to rejecting *Papas Kino* (Dad's Cinema), the post-war films that National Socialist filmmakers created extolling Germany's virtues--eventually also distanced themselves from their American counterparts. German films considered to be part of New German Cinema were "necessarily self-reflexive." Most film historians chart the emergence of New German Cinema as beginning with the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962, starting the era known commonly as "Young German Cinema," which gradually matured into New German Cinema.

The Oberhausen manifesto was released after a period of cinematic stagnation in Germany. German cinematic history is awash with excellent filmmaking, from the films of the 1920s and 1930s such as *Nosferatu* (Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, 1922) and *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931) to the Nazis' malevolently brilliant use of cinema for propagandistic purposes, to a period of dark cinema in the wake of World War II, known as Trümmerfilme (rubble films), which played out in the ruins of cities and in the destitute conditions in which people lived after the war. The cinematic period, known as *Heimatfilme* (homeland films), that predominated in the 1950s, were markedly poor films with little substance or quality. During this era, German filmmakers noticeably attempted to suppress memories of the third Reich and help the nation forget about the war by extolling the virtues of the German countryside in what can most

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succinctly be described as a period of “floundering and ineptitude, of second-hand fantasies and quickly produced travesties meant to imitate Hollywood.”\(^9\) These films were unsurprisingly made primarily by conservative, national-socialist directors who at the very least created demagogic shrines to expressly “German” virtues in their films, if not directly expressing support for the way that things used to be.

The Oberhausen Manifesto was a declaration that a group of young German filmmakers issued in order to express their desire to create a new era of feature film. They wanted to be free to be intellectually creative, and unbound by foreign commercial partners. These young filmmakers were prepared to “bear economic risk” in pursuit of their goals.\(^10\) The manifesto itself changed very little and several years passed before real change became noticeable in German cinema, but it did represent the goals of the new generation of filmmakers who wanted to separate themselves from *Papas Kino*.\(^11\) These young filmmakers’ desires were eventually fulfilled as New German Cinema grew through the 1960s and 1970s.

Each film historian describes the movement differently, but all of them agree that German filmmakers attempted to create films that rejected the model of films from the 1940s and 1950s that had shown such a positive, uncomplicated beautiful picture of Germany, without ever delving into its past. According to film historian Eric Rentschler, these films were “exotic, escapist fare” which “allowed audiences to dream of a simpler primeval Germany.”\(^12\) These films “[glorified] the simplicity and stability of the countryside” although they also “rarely

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\(^11\) Rentschler. *West German Film* 39.
\(^12\) Rentschler. *West German Film* 107-108.
transcended universal stereotypes of village life,” and “lent credence to a class hierarchy”\textsuperscript{13} These films were worrying in their complete neglect of Germany’s complex history and apparent message lauding class inequity and old German values. New German Cinema filmmakers, on the other hand, expressly challenged this cheerful complacency. These young filmmakers held themselves to literary models far more than to cinematic ones, and viewed cinema as an opportunity to engage their viewers intellectually. This concentration upon making intellectual arguments sometimes led to films that “remained [visually] rough and stiff.”\textsuperscript{14} According to Eric Rentschler, New German Cinema films were part of “a cinema that angered, provoked, scolded, and challenged its audiences, demanding that spectators think along instead of succumbing to seductive images and narrative persuasions.”\textsuperscript{15} Sabine Hake argues: “the films assumed symbolic functions by offering aesthetic alternatives to Hollywood.”\textsuperscript{16}

Of these film historians, Timothy Corrigan is the most critical of these young German filmmakers throughout the 1960s. Although the Oberhausen Manifesto was intended to “find a means to serious, authentic production,”\textsuperscript{17} Corrigan claims that they were unable to compete with American films, which were far more popular at the time. Unfortunately for the filmmakers of New German Cinema, “while it was imperative to resist ideological and economic exploitation by the American system, cinematic fluency entailed economic solvency.”\textsuperscript{18} Theaters naturally showed those films which were most popular, and the best way for theaters, and thereby

\textsuperscript{13} Rentschler. \textit{West German Film} 105-106.
\textsuperscript{15} Rentschler. \textit{West German Film}, 65.
\textsuperscript{16} Hake. \textit{German National Cinema}, 159.
\textsuperscript{17} Corrigan. \textit{New German Film}, 3.
\textsuperscript{18} Corrigan. \textit{New German Film}, 4.
filmmakers, to make money was to conform to the cinematic methods employed by most Hollywood films as Das Boot did. Das Boot was the “most expensive German film ever,” and boasted some of the most impressive technology and special effects ever used in a German film. However, although the film was commercially successful, Das Boot was not well-received by critics, as it did not reach the provocative or aesthetic standard that had been set by New German Cinema in the previous decade and wasted an opportunity to ask difficult questions about the German submariners’ role in World War II.

**GERMAN SOCIAL HISTORY AFTER WWII**

Das Boot’s public reception indicated the popularity of American style action filmmaking in contrast to the subtler, more intellectual films of New German Cinema, but it was also representative of a worrisome rightward shift in Germany and America in the early 1980’s, which attempted to redefine World War II and the German role within it. The rebellious late 1960s and 1970s gave way to a conservative shift that led to the election of Helmut Kohl (member of the Christian Democratic Union party) to Chancellor in 1982. The conservative disposition in the German populace that was so influential in the 1982 elections was also evident in the film Das Boot. The film sought to redefine the German soldier, and in particular the German submariner, but in fact only reproduced the stale, heroic image of the German soldier who can only follow orders. This simplified, sanitized image was hardly new, going back

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hundreds of years, and had been prevalent in Germany since World War I.\textsuperscript{21} The submariners were portrayed as being little older than boys, with the implication that they could not have been responsible for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Many of them were coerced or manipulated into service by Nazi propaganda, making them victims of the Nazi machine too.

While this assertion was a fair description of many soldiers, to define the soldiers as victims, without the ideological context in which they fought, simply obscured the wider social reality behind their military service. In ignoring the ideological context of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, the makers of \textit{Das Boot} were reflecting the changing socio-political situation in Germany, which led to many efforts to redefine the war, and the soldiers in it, ultimately ignoring the difficult questions that might have led to some catharsis or helped Germans come to terms with their history by directly facing the difficult ideological questions, rather than avoiding them.

Placing \textit{Das Boot} within its cultural context necessitates an examination of German social development after World War II, particularly in regard to German \textit{Vergangenheitsbewältigung}.

Many claim that few Germans were willing to speak about WWII in the immediate aftermath of the war.\textsuperscript{22} People generally adopted one of two strategies: they chose not to speak at all about their role in the war, or they vehemently denied their involvement and guilt. Holocaust scholar Dan Bar-On vividly captures this avoidance in an interview with a man named Peter, the son of a physician at Auschwitz. When Bar-On asks what Peter knew about the war, Peter answers: "My

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\item Hadley. \textit{Popular Image}. 51.
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parents didn’t tell me anything at all as far as I know, nothing at all. […] It was never talked about, and let me add that I never asked about it either.”

The details of Peter’s case were certainly unique, but his parents’ reticence about the war was very common in post-war Germany. Parents found it far easier to ignore the subject of World War II altogether or to act as though they had been victimized by the Nazis as much as anyone else. As the generation that had not participated in the war grew up, however, they began to ask more difficult questions and to demand to know the details of their parents’ involvement with National Socialism.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Germany experienced a rapid growth in “self-criticism among intellectuals.” Eventually, this criticism escalated into generational revolts, as many German youths rejected their fathers’ usually more conservative beliefs and began to join socialist groups. A preliminary sign of this was the rise of leftist youth movements such as that of the SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund or Socialist German Student League) in 1968. This leftward shift among students marked a rejection of the crimes of their parents and often took the form of anti-nationalism. As Konrad Jarausch describes it: “The charge of responsibility for Nazi crimes played an important part in the indictment of guilt-stricken fathers, as it allowed rebellious sons to reject their traditional nationalist values all the more decisively.”

According to Jarausch, the generation that had lived through the war finally realized the loss of authority that they had managed to avoid with the downfall of the Third Reich. Primarily, those who had been in positions of authority during the Third Reich continued to hold them in the wake of the war, but the younger generation demanded answers to their

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24 Jarausch. After Hitler. 65.
25 Jarausch. After Hitler, 65
questions about the war and challenged their silence on the subject. The older generation’s inability to justify their behavior made them vulnerable to criticism and rejection by a generation that was busy embracing internationalism, environmentalism and anti-imperialism.26

By the 1980s, however, German socio-politics gradually began to become conservative again, which countered the liberal shift of the 1960s and 70s. This shift culminated in the complete collapse of the SPD-FDP coalition in late 1982. The CDU’s success in the elections of March 1983 led to Helmut Kohl’s appointment as chancellor.27 This conservative swing reflected a similar shift in the United States, where Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 over Jimmy Carter. The conservative transition was also preceded by an increasing militarism throughout the 1970s under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and accompanied by a reevaluation of history regarding the German soldiers in World War II. German defense expenditures steadily increased at an increasing rate between 1970 and 1981, jumping to 18.2% of the federal budget by 1982.28 The United States helped in rearming the Federal Republic of Germany because of the Cold War, supporting them in order to have a militaristically strong ally in mainland Europe.

As Germany and America became more conservative, however, a worrisome trend emerged, of which Das Boot was a symptom. The two nations engaged in a radical reevaluation of history that sought to change the international perception of the Germans, particularly the soldiers in World War II. The most blatant example of this reinterpretation of history occurred about 4 years after the release of the film Das Boot, in May 1985. President Reagan, despite

26 Ibid
criticism both at home and abroad, visited the Bitburg cemetery at Kolmeshöhe, where Nazi soldiers and SS-officers were buried. President Reagan defended his visit by stating that he “think[s] that there is nothing wrong with visiting that cemetery where those young men are victims of Nazism also, even though they were fighting in the German uniform, drafted into service to carry out the hateful wishes of the Nazis.” He also stated: “They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps.”29 President Reagan’s remarks were particularly disturbing and deservedly criticized because of his comparison of the German soldiers to those who had died in the concentration camps.30 Such a comparison was a complete rewriting of history and displayed staggering ignorance of the realities of World War II. Many German soldiers were undoubtedly coerced, tricked or otherwise manipulated into the military, but placing them on the same level as the victims of the Holocaust as if they were equivalent completely ignored the context of their service, as well as the reality of the concentration camps, and the wholesale slaughter of the Jews. German soldiers suffered horribly, as do soldiers in any war, but the ideology for which they were fighting is still relevant.

The debate that was reborn in 1986, about a year after President Reagan’s remarks at Bitburg, was known as the Historikerstreit, and centered on the Germany’s role in the Holocaust and showed that a disturbing number of revisionist historians were attempting to place the blame for the war and the holocaust entirely upon Hitler and his closest advisors. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas was at the forefront of this debate, decrying attempts to rewrite German history and rebuild German nationalism. As Habermas points out, this revising is often done by separating

the German Kaiser, and as a result, they became proud symbols of a “better” age. As more ex-
submariners wrote books and more stories about them began to disseminate, the U-boat’s
popularity only rose in Germany. The German navy was not permitted to build submarines, but
they had nevertheless caught the public’s attention as an elite and proud fighting unit.

The Versailles treaty declared that “The construction or acquisition of any submarine,
even for commercial purposes, shall be forbidden to Germany.” The military and naval
restrictions would have ensured Germany’s total inability to mount another World War, had they
been enforced. Unfortunately, Adolf Hitler’s Germany began designing and building submarines
illegally, and launched their first submarine in flagrant offence of the Treaty of Versailles in
1935. The U-boat enjoyed a celebrated status among veterans in between wars, and many had
argued that submarines were essential for the German navy, and that they must demand them.

However, despite a great deal of enthusiasm for U-boats and the reintroduction of submarines
into the navy, Hitler did not apparently share his countrymen’s beliefs in the absolute necessity
of submarines for naval power. He focused entirely on building up his land army and surface
fleet, which the Allies were far better prepared to face, and “had slight appreciation of the
significance of sea power.” For the second time in a century, the German navy began the war
without an arsenal of the very ships that might have turned the balance of the war in the
Germans’ favor. The German Navy only had 43 U-boats in combat condition. Commodore Karl
 Dönitz summed up this naval inadequacy succinctly when he said: “The war was in one sense

lost before it began."40 This perspective on the War of the Atlantic, while reassuring retrospectively, ignores the efficacy of the German U-boats in that conflict, and the difficulties that the Allies faced in combating them.

 Dönitz may have been trying to excuse his loss by exaggerating the odds that he faced, but the ruthless efficiency of the U-boat offensive in the Battle of the Atlantic is inarguable. Rear Admiral Samuel Morison, who wrote an account of the operational history of the navy, provides a unique perspective on the Battle of the Atlantic from the American perspective. As a naval officer his work was undoubtedly biased, but his assessment of German U-boat efficacy seems fully honest and without guile when he argues that:

 Beaten Nazis may take comfort in reflecting that no army, fleet, or other unit in World War II, with the exception of their own people who dealt in organized torture, wrought such destruction and misery as the U-boats.41

 Morison certainly gives a double-edged compliment in comparing the German submariners to those who actively tortured prisoners in the Holocaust, but the German submariners' ability is nevertheless transparent. Whatever disadvantage the German navy suffered in numbers, they were deadly effective in their attacks on trade routes, and in fact, Morison admits that “in the Atlantic the balance did not begin to tip our way until mid-1943,”42 well after the United States entered World War II. Many merchants and sailors grew to fear and hate the German U-boats over the course of the war. Their strategies were perhaps not particularly complex, as they tended to lie in wait along trade routes and before harbor entrances, but their methods were effective,

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40 “Essay on the War at Sea” Translated by the British Naval Intelligence Division, Appendix II Interrogation para. 4. Quoted from: Morison. Battle of the Atlantic. 4.
41 Morison. Battle of the Atlantic, 204.
42 Ibid.
and the sailors on any ship that left port were sure to feel on edge as if an unseen enemy were constantly hunting them.\textsuperscript{43}

During World War II, Germany’s propaganda ministry sought to build a myth of youth into the image of the submariner. The government released false statistics that minimized the death-toll suffered by submariners, all the while extolling the elitism and selectiveness of the unit. Dönitz wanted to “attract the right young talent – tough, hardy lads with steadfast hearts.”\textsuperscript{44} What Dönitz actually sought were sailors, regardless of age; he wanted men or boys, whom he could instruct well enough to send to sea in an U-boat to keep their numbers up. American war journalist Robert Casey noted during the war that the German U-boat arm was beginning to run out of men to run the submarines that they continued to construct. These inexperienced sailors were still able to destroy Allied shipping, so long as they worked in unison, but American experience and talent began to tell. Casey quotes Commander Lew Parks of the navy as saying: “our chief weapon against the German submarine menace in the Atlantic is going to be the personnel of the German submarine.”\textsuperscript{45} Parks’ opinion proved to be correct, as Admiral Dönitz steadily ran out of men to send into the Battle of the Atlantic. German youths’ belief in joining the “elite corps” of submariners and finding glory in battle was sadly misplaced. As the war went on, the U-boat arm was forced to rely upon younger and less-experienced sailors, and the propaganda ministry began exaggerating the successes of the submarine fleet and recycling news of past victories in order to keep morale and recruitment high.\textsuperscript{46} Unfortunately, the promise of honor and glory lured many men as young as 16 into the ranks of the U-boat arm, and ultimately,

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\textsuperscript{45} Casey. \textit{Battle Below}, 74.
\textsuperscript{46} Hadley. \textit{Popular Image}, 101.
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to their deaths. By the end of the war: "only one submarine in 4 was returning from patrol," and according to one German veteran, 32,000 of 39,000 submariners died during the war.\(^{47}\) The Nazi regime kept this statistic from reaching the public in order to maintain morale even as the entire war effort was crumbling around them.

After World War II, several veterans of the war released novels or historical treatises on submarine warfare. Several, along with Admiral Dönitz himself, believed that they had done their duties by remaining loyal to the German state. They choose not to qualify their actions as remaining true to National Socialism, but rather to the duty of a sailor, which is to persist in one’s loyalty to national service, regardless of anything else.\(^{48}\) This perspective allowed submariners to embrace their time in the navy without having to qualify or validate it to themselves. Whatever their actions, whatever the crimes of the regime, for which they had fought, they felt that they had done their duty, done it heroically, and could not have done otherwise. This attempt to place the burden of the decision upon others was common after the war, as it was the easy method of escape. The German soldiers didn’t need to discuss or argue anything if they could simply claim that they were powerless and that only those at the top were responsible for their actions.

Despite widespread Allied employment of submarine warfare, the Allies generally considered German U-boats to be menacing antagonists: dangerous, but also without humanity or mercy. Although the Allies engaged in submarine warfare too, German submariners were perceived as infinitely more devious and sinister. Hadley writes that "popular imagination

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 107.

\(^{48}\) Ibid, 105.
outside Germany would have us believe that two types of craft have been engaged in the history of underwater combat: submarines and U-boats. U-boot is a literal translation of submarine, shortened from Unterseeboot but particularly in the wake of World War II, Allied nations used the term to reference only those craft that had attacked their shipping in the Battle of the Atlantic, and referred only to their own submersibles as "submarines."

This difference in the perception of submarines led to a very different image of the submarine in popular American films as in German ones. Operation Petticoat (Blake Edwards, 1959) is a prime example of an American film, satirizing the very elements of the submarine that had made it such a popular image in Germany. The film deftly lampooned the fetishization of submarine technology to the point of eroticization, through satire and puns. At one point, a nurse, brought on board the ship states that "That was some high-pressure piping" in her description of the work that she and the chief engineer complete in the engine room. Such puns exaggerate the sexual connection to technology that is prevalent in submarine films. Director Blake Edwards was renowned for comedies that dealt with sexuality, masculinity and pleasure and pain in a farcical and often darkly comedic manner, and staging a comedic sexual exchange on a ship that has often been considered a symbol of masculinity illustrated a new territory for "war movies."

References to sexuality are all but unavoidable in submarine films. Everything is phallus-shaped, from the pipes to the submarine itself, to the torpedoes that it shoots out of its front end,

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49 Ibid, X.
much like ejaculation. Films can either celebrate these ties to the phallus and to masculinity in a
reverent manner, tying man with machine, and making technology into a strong masculine
symbol, or they can use the very same symbols for humor, challenging masculinity, and forcing
the viewer to perceive it differently. *Operation Petticoat* toys with this phallic image by painting
the submarine pink, thereby feminizing the aggressive, war-like, and male-dominated phallic
image, normally embodied by the submarine. The submarine played a far more marginal role in
American identity, however, than the U-boat did in Germany. American submariners were
considered to be elite, without question, but they did not receive the type of hero-worship and
adulation that German submariners received during both World Wars. The image was simply
less controversial, so the satirization and feminization of that image was far more acceptable than
it would have been in Germany, particularly in 1959, when Germany was still very conservative,
and former Nazis, as well as former submariners, were still very much involved in German
politics and society.

This usage endowed the term “U-boat” with connotations of pernicious, illegal warfare,
and the killing of innocents. Many of the Allies similarly classified the German submariners as
criminals who had no honor and attacked unarmed vessels without warning. The German navy
lived up to this image by declaring unrestricted submarine warfare in both the first and second
World Wars. Interestingly, however, Admiral Dönitz, the German submarine commander was
acquitted at Nuremberg of conspiracy to commit crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes
against humanity. He was, however, found guilty of planning, initiating, and waging wars of
aggression, and crimes against the laws of war. Dönitz’ conviction on these counts is partially

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52 Casey. *Battle Below*, 17.
attributable to his order to wage unrestricted submarine warfare against neutral shipping around Great Britain and Ireland.\(^5\) Dönitz had also issued War Order 154, which prohibited the U-boats from rescuing survivors from sunken ships. Contrary to popular perception and to Order 154, however, most German submarines tried to assist those sailors in lifeboats, if their own ship was not in immediate danger.\(^4\) While the fear of U-boat attacks and the danger posed by them were very real, much of the public perception of German World War II U-boats is grounded in myths and stories, rather than in reality.

*Das Boot* was released almost 40 years after World War II, but the emotional wounds of that conflict were nevertheless fresh in both Germany and America. In this fractured climate, a film such as *Das Boot* could have served as a step towards coming to terms with the past. Director Wolfgang Petersen had the opportunity to transcend the virulent debate about the submariner’s role in World War II, and truly provide a new, productive perspective to help the younger generation of Germans come to terms with the actions of their parents and grandparents, and provide a springboard for dialogue between generations. *Das Boot* did transcend the dialogue in many ways, choosing a representation of submariners, uncommon in both Germany and America, but in so doing avoided the difficult questions of wartime service in the German navy. Petersen followed Buchheim’s intentions in creating a representation of the German submariners as victims that had been common following World War II. The submariners portrayed in *Das Boot* are neither heroes, as so many veterans after the First and Second World Wars described them, nor villains, as they were so often depicted in Allied news and art. The

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problem of this depiction was that it tended to focus on the submariners as simple soldiers or "nur Soldat." This concept, while accepted by many after World War II, became less excusable throughout the 1970s as many began to realize that such a concept was "a barrier to moral living."\(^{55}\) Trying to act as if one were simply following orders removed all ethical choices from a soldier, but would also not allow a true examination or coming to terms with the past.

The film *Das Boot* also resembled some of the U-boat literature from the post-World War I era. Hadley described those books by saying that: "Action rather than reflection prevailed."\(^{56}\) While he does not attribute this sentence to *Das Boot* at any point, its meaning is still perfectly applicable. Petersen filmed *Das Boot* for an audience consisting of primarily seventeen-to-twenty-eight year-old young men who were, to the understanding of Bavaria Film Studios, "hot after action and destruction."\(^{57}\) This clear statement of purpose accurately reflects Hadley's interpretation of post-World War I submarine literature. Petersen exchanged intellectual substance and reflection for explosions and emotional trauma. Even Hadley, who seems to hold *Das Boot* in high esteem, admits that "The film depended on emotional impact, not rational argument."\(^{58}\) In other words, the film was intended primarily to entertain, not to be thought provoking. Petersen used the template provided by Buchheim in order to make his movie, but used horror movie tactics and continuous action, as well as repeated explosions in order to attract an audience. In doing so, Petersen sacrificed time that might have been more productively spent.

\(^{56}\) Ibid, 49.
\(^{57}\) Ibid, 189.
\(^{58}\) Ibid, 148.
on character exposition and self-reflection upon the war. Even so, Petersen’s desire to show “war as it really was”\(^{59}\) betrayed his intention to impart a certain message through the film.

Petersen’s attempt to film an anti-war action movie ultimately sabotaged his own message because his commitment to create an exciting film turns it into more of a war movie than an anti-war film. A film that is an “action movie” is not necessarily of lower quality than films of other genres, and it can certainly be thoughtful and intelligent, but a certain, well-deserved stereotype of action movies is their reliance upon, just that, action to drive the plot rather than character development or the story’s arc. Often the plot serves merely to propel the story from one action scene to the next, without needing to be particularly thoughtful or reflective. Such films also tend to promote war by making it seem exhilarating and adventurous. The action scenes generally release pent up tension, both for the characters and for the audience, and it was this quality especially that detracted from Petersen’s intended message.

The problem that Petersen faced was how to make an exciting action movie, while also making a thoughtful anti-war film with a discernible message. These two goals, however, seem to be mutually exclusive. As one of Buchheim’s critics wrote about his book, “whoever writes about war, writes a war book. There are no anti-war books.”\(^{60}\) This sentiment is perhaps even more applicable to film than to books. Any film that portrays war in order to entertain, even if its message is anti-war, is still using war as a theme to interest the audience. Regardless of the message, the scenes of war are still meant to be compelling, which detracts from any anti-war


statement. Petersen’s film is a perfect example of this contradiction. While he used horror movie techniques to make the U-boat claustrophobic and oppressive, he also employed extensive special effects to create scenes of violence, both on and off the ship, that were spectacular.

Petersen cut together so many action scenes, that the true nature of war that he wished to grasp never came through. Because the action scenes follow each other so closely, the viewer never sees the tedium and banality that is only punctuated by the sheer terror of being under attack. Petersen keeps the plot moving to get from one action scene to the next, while slipping into generalities with his characters to avoid portraying the soldiers as anything but average men.

**TECHNOLOGY AND MASCULINITY**

Society has always associated the submarine with masculinity, and with good reason. As a military vessel, women were not permitted on board, and even today, most navies prohibit women serving on submarines, even though they are permitted on other naval vessels. When a small group of individuals must stay at sea for months at a time without any contact with people other than the crew, the temptation of having a woman aboard was considered far too great to risk an entire crew losing control. Beyond the very obvious association of military ships with masculinity, the submarine holds a very specific connection to it because of its shape and function. In addition to its phallic shape, firing torpedoes from the front of the submarine closely resembles ejaculation, and as a result, the submarine’s association with masculinity, and the male penis is entirely understandable. Submarine literature has a great opportunity to use this association, both comically and critically, but while some use it to challenge gender norms and
stereotypes, others use it to remain firmly entrenched in their misogyny and outdated masculinity.

In *Operation Petticoat*, discussed above, Cary Grant’s submarine must take on five female passengers, and they immediately begin to create confusion and tumult, as they “do not belong” in that environment and the men must adjust to the completely abnormal situation. The women do not belong on the ship in two respects. First and foremost, they are women joining the most isolated refuge of masculinity possible. These men go months at a time without seeing a single woman, so the sudden appearance of five is noteworthy to say the least. In addition to their feminine status, however, they are also nurses. This occupation isolates them even more, because they are feminine healers in a masculine ship, designed only to destroy. The ramifications of their presence on the submarine are therefore volatile. In some cases, they prove themselves just as capable (or more) as the men, such as when one of them begins performing mechanical (masculine) duties in the engine-room, much to the chagrin of the chief mechanic’s mate, who believes that “a woman just shouldn’t mess around with a man’s machinery.”

This attempt to rebuff the nurse and her subsequent proof of her abilities mock the masculinization of the submarine and everyone in it. She has the ability, as a woman, to fix the submarine, or, to put it another way, to make the phallus work. The men were unable to do it without her help, and her knowledge of their “machinery” seems better than their own.

Director Blake Edwards also uses the metaphor of firing a torpedo as ejaculation to hilarious effect. When the captain of the submarine, played by Cary Grant, sees an enemy tanker,
he begins the procedure to fire upon it and sink it. Unfortunately, the captain’s clumsy love
interest enters the bridge during the countdown sequence, and in his haste to remove her from the
bridge, they accidentally trigger a “premature ejaculation,” firing the torpedo early, and sending
it up on the beach to harmlessly blow up a truck.\(^\text{62}\) This metaphor is fairly unambiguous, and
shows the contrasting effect that women can have on the phallus, namely to make it
dysfunctional. In both instances, however, the men surrender control of the machine to the
women, in effect giving up their masculinity. While the phallus symbol of the submarine can
play a strong role for comedic effect, *Das Boot* makes use of the metaphor too, but rather more
seriously. As all of the piping is entirely exposed, even those scenes of the inside of the
submarine are unavoidably packed with phallic symbols, and when the men must hurl
themselves toward the front of the submarine to assist in submergence by throwing themselves
through the small circular hatches, the phallic shape of the submarine truly stands out.

The film *Das Boot* portrays the submariners, as well as the boat, erotically in a
traditionally militaristic masculine approach. Petersen uses the very same erotic image of
masculinity that the National Socialists held as the ideal masculine form. The naval
correspondent watches and attempts to take pictures, as a group of shirtless submariners oil the
torpedoes and ram them into the tubes, which cannot help but convey homoerotic images and
relationships to technology.\(^\text{63}\) This representation of the masculine body was common during the
Third Reich. To the Nazi High Command: “Physical exercise had always been important in the
construction of masculinity, and from the beginning it was not undertaken for its own sake but


\(^{63}\) *Das Boot*. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Perf. Jürgen Prochnow and Herbert Grönemeyer. Bavaria Film, Columbia
Pictures, 1981. VHS.
for the purpose of sculpting the ideal male body." The purpose of their exercises were far beyond recreation, as the Nazis very clearly chose to promote exercise in order to sculpt their men's bodies and forge them into group-oriented mass.

The Nazis' ideal body image was racially based, as they chose to follow Greek and Nordic models, while naturally rejecting any physical characteristics associated with Jews or other countertypes such as blacks or gypsies. Petersen's use of muscular, well-defined male bodies in this particular scene reflected a similar appreciation for the male body at work that was so prevalent in the Third Reich. Petersen is hardly the only director to use a group of shirtless male bodies, working in tandem toward a common goal, as it is still pervasive in film and television today. Nevertheless, this trope is far more prevalent in militarized societies that ascribe to a dominant, violence-based perception of masculinity, and Petersen's film and the success thereof, partly reflected the resurgence of that form of masculinity.

A further weakness of the film Das Boot is its complete acceptance of the submariners' victimization and does not attempt to delve into this skewed masculinity and critique or come to terms with it. The submariners must each play a role in the maintenance of the submarine, but the image that Petersen displays is entirely conservative and almost propagandistic. The men are shown handling equipment, torpedoes and engine parts, essentially acting out the roles of machines, all while perspiring heroically. This representation of the men deprives them of their individuality, which was a common theme in fascistic masculinity. Social historian George Mosse describes the ideal image of masculinity under National Socialism by stating that: "The

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65 Ibid. 178.
Nazis...were apt to think only about people in the mass; any individualism was foreign to their cast of mind. This perspective was obviously manifest in the Nazis’ policy of persecution, under which any undesirable group was not comprised of individuals, but was rather one body that needed to be eliminated. Their policy also extended, however, to their own identities. The men fighting in the submarine were not fifty individuals, each performing separate tasks, but rather one unit, working together to achieve one goal.

This mentality was a part of fascist propaganda after the First World War, as serving in battle “led to true Manhood.” As Mosse continues, however, “this idealized veteran was not individualist, he was at one with his squad and his people.” In the case of submariners, the individual became subordinated, not just to the larger group, but to the physical submarine. The individual became so inextricably linked with the machine that he lost his selfhood and diminished to be simply another cog in the machine. Their individual lives became extraneous, and were therefore mourned, if at all, as valuable property lost. Even when all hope was lost for the Germans in World War Two, Admiral Dönitz continued to send submarines out on missions, even though only 1 in 4 was returning safely. These catastrophic and horrific losses should have convinced anyone that continuing to engage the allies with submarines was practically suicidal, and that wasting so many German lives for a lost cause was selfish and unnecessary. In a society in which submariners were little more than necessary pieces required to make submarines function, their lives were of little importance; continually losing submarines to

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66 Mosse. Image 164.
67 Ibid. 158.
combat was unfortunate as they could not be replaced, but their loss was counted as the loss of a submarine, rather than the fifty men inside of it.

Petersen was subscribing to the very same perception of masculinity in his depiction of his characters. They were not individuals, but rather pieces of a machine that served a greater purpose and duty. As German social historian, Klaus Theweleit describes the phenomenon:

"Each component in the Soldierly totality-body has been made functional by the drill; battle gives it the opportunity to prove its own function conforms to the functioning principle of the machine itself. Each totality-components becomes a miniature of the machine." 69 Essentially, men are forged into warlike pieces of a machine, and battle gives them an opportunity to prove themselves and redefine themselves. Theweleit describes how men wish to recreate themselves without mothers and without other feminine influence, and war is the way in which they reach that self-definition and become "the products of their own labor." 70 Essentially, men desire to be creators, and therefore trivialize the woman’s labor process in the attempt to make their own creative process superior by comparison. This masculinity was clearly at work in the militarized societies that held technology, and particularly military technology in such high esteem that they even bonded their masculinity to it, attempting to reduce their dependence on women by connecting their sexual drive, and the fulfillment thereof, to technology and destruction.

Petersen hoped to, in some way, show how propaganda forced men to become accomplices to this fascist sense of masculinity, and thereby begin to acquit the German soldiers of their guilt. Petersen explained that: "The film wanted to show how easily these [young] people

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were entrapped by the propagandized “fascination” of war.” The German submariner remains a victim in this image of the war, with his only crime seemingly being naïveté. Nevertheless, Petersen’s use of Lieutenant Werner to reveal the false sense of adventure and masculinity that led men to go to war, exhibits a greater awareness of the fascist masculinity than he previously displayed in any scene. Werner illustrates this masculinity perfectly, as he tells the captain of U-96, also known as “Der Alte” (the old man): “I wanted it like this. To be heading out into the unknown. Where no mother will care for us. No woman crosses our path. Where only reality reigns. Cruel and grand.” Petersen shows how this masculine dream of being free from the feminine and ensconcing oneself among only men led many like Werner to join the submariners and fight in order to join the masculine brotherhood. Petersen ignores the submariners’ culpability throughout the entire film, trying to present them as victims without responsibility for their actions, but this scene brings another argument into . Here, for the first time, Petersen honestly depicts and criticizes a version of masculinity that was very convincing and effective during World War Two. He still uses Werner’s realization to further victimize the submariners and show how strongly they were duped, but at the very least he begins to criticize the thoughts and the aggressive form of masculinity that was so common in Germany during the war. His interpretation of that propaganda and its effect is simplistic, but it would be equally foolish to completely disregard the role of propagandistic manipulation in many soldiers’ decisions to join the elite submariners.

72 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 2’07"
The problem with associating machines with masculinity is not so much the affiliation itself, but rather the resulting fetishization of technology that consequently creates an unhealthy obsession with technology, and its glorification, almost as if it were a deity. Particularly in militaristic societies, technology and “progress” are the foundations upon which such regimes build their power. Everything is sacrificed for the sake of technological advancement. This tendency is present in *Das Boot*, but never actually addressed. Petersen never challenges the structure or the perspective that begets this fetishization of technology, even though such an analysis would be truly thought provoking and exciting to face, particularly because of the parallels to 1970s German and American societies in regards to technology. The late 1970s were a period of heavy militarization in Western Germany under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of the SDP, after the questionable results of Willy Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik*.

The idea behind *Ostpolitik* was to ease the tensions between eastern and Western Europe through a series of treaties. Willy Brandt was the chancellor of West Germany between 1969 and 1974, and wanted to achieve a productive dialogue with Eastern Europe in order to decrease tensions. Brandt did so by encouraging negotiations of mutual and balanced force reductions (MBFR) the NATO meeting in Reykjavik in 1968, which would ideally create a stable relationship between the Eastern and Western Blocks through arms control and disarmament. However, these negotiations, which began in 1973, ultimately failed to produce results. Brandt’s government also supported the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and in the context of the conference his government was motivated by: “renunciation of force, peaceful resolution of conflicts, peacefully agreed boundary changes, exclusion of the German question from the treaty, a specific tie to the MBFR negotiations, freedom of movement, and
practical results.”\textsuperscript{73} Brandt hoped that such a conference could improve the circumstances of the détente between East and West. Proponents of these talks, which occurred between 1972 and 1975, argued that the conferences created an environment that was more stable, due to the parties’ agreement to: “renunciation of the use of force or the threat of force, economic cooperation, and cooperation in humanitarian matters.”\textsuperscript{74} This policy’s detractors, however, claimed that the expansion of the East-West conflict around the world in the 1970s, including the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, were indicative of Ostpolitik’s failure as a political strategy.\textsuperscript{75}

By 1979, technological innovation was once again paramount in order to outdo an opponent. NATO agreed station cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe in 1979, while simultaneously negotiating arms reductions with the Soviets, just as the cold war began heating up again. During this time the dependence upon technology was more marked than ever before, as each side relied upon their technology to intimidate their opponents. This reliance led to a fixation upon technology, as people began to regard it as their only protection against the “other” and were therefore wont to personify and often sexualize the machinery that kept them safe. The situation was naturally completely different than it had been during the Third Reich, but the commitment to technology and to extravagant machines facing off against each other was very similar. Unfortunately, Petersen seemed to succumb to this commitment to technology, rather than seek to critique it in his film.

\textsuperscript{73} Jacobsen. “The role of the FRG in the world, 1949-1982.” 163.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. 165.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. 167.
Every aspect of *Das Boot*, from the way in which it was created to its final edited form, indicates an overdeveloped fascination with technology, and an abiding need to implement it. Rather than criticizing this attitude toward technology, or showing how strangely dehumanizing it could be, Petersen used his film to celebrate the wonders of technology. Petersen’s very creation of *Das Boot* exhibits his obsession with technological advancement. *Das Boot* was more expensive than any other German film to date, and much of that money was spent on special effects and perfecting replicas of the boat. Petersen was clearly fascinated with using technology to show the boat being bombarded by depth charges. He wanted to use the awesome power generated by those special effects to shock the audience, and indeed overpower their senses with the concussive noise and sight of the explosions. His use of special effects for that purpose seems to almost be intended to flaunt the technology of film. Petersen wanted to cater to an audience, both in Germany and in America, that preferred Hollywood films to the more independent, thoughtful New German Cinema films, and his success is an indication that many people were just as impressed with and fascinated by technology as he was.

Unfortunately, just as the focus on technological advancement and the fetishization of technology detracted from the humanity of the men who fought during World War Two, so too did Petersen’s predilection for pyrotechnic displays and focus upon the technology of war diminish the characters in his film to mere caricatures, barely fleshed out, and in reality, more of a side-show to the visual spectacle than the locus of the film. None of the characters are on-screen for long enough for the audience to develop an emotional understanding of them. Their stories seem to only exist in order to get the film from one exciting spectacle to the next. Even between events, Petersen’s focus often seems to be upon the boat, rather than the men. The
model of the submarine that Petersen used in the film was so perfect that even Buchheim, who sharply criticized the film, found that “the star of this film is the boat” and that “no one- with the exception of the submarine builders, who were remarkably exact- holds themselves exactly to reality.” Buchheim’s amazement at the boat is well-deserved, as the set for the film was meant to exactly portray the VIIC model German submarine, and did so perfectly. Petersen’s use of the boat indicates, however, his own fascination with the technology of war, rather than a critical analysis of technology’s role in society and its tendency to eliminate the individual’s agency.

Das Boot had the potential to create a story about men, and how they may be separated from the iron tube that encompasses their universe for months at a time. As Buchheim stated, however, and as the title indicates, the story is all about the boat, and the individual men are ultimately quite unimportant in the overall plot. The Captain is the character who stands out the most as a unique personality in the film, along with Lieutenant Werner, the war correspondent who accompanies the submarine. Otherwise, the characters are mostly stale clichés. The stereotypical young fiancé, the engine-room operator who loses his nerve, but later redeems himself, and the bedraggled, war-weary chief all serve little purpose other than to play their one-dimensional, instantly recognizable characters. No character, with the exception of the captain and the lieutenant, is particularly memorable, and while it could be argued that the film is simply accurately portraying the war the way that it “really” was, this argument ignores the complexity of the actual situation.

“Star ist in Diesem Film das Boot.” “Keiner –mit Ausnahme der U-Boot Bauer, die Außerordentlich exakt gearbeitet haben- hält sich genau an der Realität.”
The men serving on submarines were not simply disposable cookie-cutter caricatures without any real defining features. Attempting to portray them as such only exemplifies the very dominance by technology that should be criticized, rather than indulged. Petersen fondly displays sweaty, hardworking men performing tasks in the submarine. They glisten and grunt as they do their work, and look like propagandistic models for their country as they all perform their functions without thought. Their tasks include working on the engine and examining the torpedoes, and this portrayal dehumanizes and simplifies the lives of 50 men into the various functions of a machine. Petersen robs the characters of free agency, and therefore gives the audience no chance to challenge the actions of the characters or assess their motives, because in this film they have no choice, and indeed, do not seem to even have the faculty to choose. Had the film portrayed the submariners as more than simply unthinking cogs in the machine, some form of coming to terms with the past may have been possible. Audiences might have been able to relate to the complexity of their lives and choices, thereby gaining a more nuanced perspective than simply claiming that they were all unwilling victims of the Third Reich.

THE FILM DAS BOOT

Das Boot reflects precisely the inability or unwillingness to confront Nazism and the Holocaust that was beginning to reemerge in the late 1970s and 1980s. It was easier for many Germans to ignore their National Socialist history in much the same way that it was simpler for Petersen to film his characters outside of their ideological context. The inclusion of ideology would make any audience far less sympathetic or receptive to the dangers faced by the older

77 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 0’ 29’’.
generation represented by the soldiers in the film. In order to create sympathetic soldier heroes, the makers of *Das Boot* chose to remove the soldiers from their political contexts and portray them solely as individuals. The filmmakers ensured that the ideology of National Socialism was only represented by the commanding officers who were completely detached from the conflict and had sent the men to sea and an officious lieutenant whom no one likes. This image is comforting because it shows the men simply as soldiers, with the same problems as the soldiers of any other army. The problem is that the omission of the ideological background deprives German audience members, as well as international audiences, from the opportunity to come to terms with the concept of the World War II German soldier. Forcing the audience to see Nazi soldiers both as men who fought for an awful cause, as well as men worthy of sympathy because they lived in constant fear of death, would have been difficult, but far more thought provoking and evaluative.

Film scholar Brad Prager sees *Das Boot* as an offspring of American anti-Vietnam war films, but the comparison ignores director Wolfgang Petersen’s refusal to even pose the questions that the characters in those American movies face. Corrigan argues that the film could be considered “a coopting by Hollywood rather than of Hollywood”\(^\text{78}\), insinuating that *Das Boot* was simply a continuation of the American genre of war movies vindicating the common soldier in films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979).\(^\text{79}\) This reading of *Das Boot* is accurate in that the film portrays the common soldier suffering in combat, while the commanders who order them there sit removed and out of danger with no conception

\(^{78}\) Corrigan. *New German Film*, 204 n.3.

of what the reality of war is. However, the film ignores much of the ideological message that made *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* true anti-war movies. *Das Boot* does not deal with the German Reich in any way, or the victims thereof, thereby avoiding having to show the cause for which the submariners were actually fighting. *Apocalypse Now* directly criticized the Vietnam war, questioning the presence of American soldiers in Vietnam, and presenting the viewer not only with the perpetual and futile violence of the conflict, but also with the responsibility to question the war and the American presence in Vietnam. *Das Boot* effectively depicts war, and the dehumanizing effect that it has on soldiers in an unsettling manner, similar to that of *Apocalypse Now*, but avoids criticizing the ideology that the German submariners were supporting with their service. In *Das Boot*, war’s dehumanizing impact upon soldiers is different from its impact in *Apocalypse Now*, in that they lose their humanity to become simply a piece of a machine, designed for a task. By contrast, the American soldiers in Vietnam who lose their humanity as a result of the horror and violence of the war and seek to remove themselves from technology and instead try to become a part of the jungle.

The films’ messages diverge sharply, in that *Das Boot* chooses to forego the complexity that lies in self-criticism and in questioning the soldiers’ cause. The submariners do not question Nazi ideology throughout the length of the film, as their own responsibility as supporters of National Socialism is avoided. Several soldiers, including the captain, make remarks denouncing Nazi leadership such as Hermann Göring, head of the German air force: “Our patrol planes. Where are they, Herr Göring? The British have plenty of them. Talking big is all he’s good for.
Big heroes. Nothing but hot air, all of them." Although these statements express animosity toward those in the regime, it does not question the purpose of their mission or the greater context of the war. As a result, the statement that the film makes is only superficial, because it refuses to come to terms with the cause for which they were fighting. Brad Prager is correct in stating that this evasion "can be understood as a persistent symptom of the collective denial of the past." Particularly in the steadily more conservative atmosphere toward the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, many Germans sought to shift the guilt entirely upon the Nazi regime, and ignore the guilt of the German people.

This shift of guilt is obvious in Petersen's depiction of U-96's provisioning in Spain. He shows a stark contrast between the battle-weary, dirty submariners and the well-dressed, loyal Nazi officers, whom they meet. The obviously well-fed officers greet the men as "heroes" and one of them speaks to Der Alte about how difficult conditions are (for the officers) after describing the . He then callously questions Der Alte about how many ships he has sunk, to which the captain does not reply, but merely looks taken aback at the impudence of the question. The entire scene seems designed solely to disassociate the submariners from the Nazi chain of command. The officers greet them with calls of "Sieg-Heil!" and "Heil Hitler," which the submariners blatantly do not return, except with looks of discomfort and moral superiority. Petersen plainly tries to illustrate that these men could not be more different, despite fighting for the same nation and cause. This attempt to set the submariners and the officers up as separate

80 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 0' 24''.
81 Prager. Beleaguered under the Sea, 242.
82 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 1' 29''
83 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 1' 31''
entities certainly helps set the submariners up as victims, but it also refuses to acknowledge them as perpetrators, which the film conveniently ignores.

Social scholar Theodor Adorno described this method of memory in 1960, stating that it "does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory." Adorno was describing German avoidance of dealing with World War II in the 1950s, but the submariners in Das Boot embody his description perfectly. The film carefully avoids passing moral judgment on the actions that the submariners undertake. Although their entire purpose is to seek out and destroy shipping convoys without warning, rather than engaging in standard naval battles, the sailors never question their orders, and never question their actions. The characters do not engage in any form of self-reflection or questioning after their attacks and the violence that they perpetrate remains distanced from them. This distance avoids the emotional trauma of the war, and frees them from the burden of guilt for the war crimes that they committed. This avoidance is worrisome because it eschews an aspect of German history that, if handled correctly, might have forced viewers to come to terms with World War II submarine warfare in a way that had theretofore been unaddressed in German film. Films have the power to make significant differences in society, but they must face and examine difficult questions in order to do so, which is something that Das Boot failed to accomplish.

Unsurprisingly, Wolfgang Petersen omitted the ideological factors in his creation of Das Boot intentionally. He argued that "I was reproached that we Germans were still far from ready

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to depict the submariners on the U-boats as normal people like you and me. We were always aware that we were the war criminals, we were the guilty ones! But that’s not what Das Boot is about. The film simply tries to point out what war really means.85 Petersen’s desire to show what war really means, while admirable, ultimately lead to a much more sanitized, commercial film than it could otherwise have been. He chose to avoid the difficulty of placing his characters historically, and instead submerges them to escape the ideologies that would otherwise inevitably face them. As Prager explains it “It is no coincidence that the film he chose to make takes place on a submarine, and that the dark depths to which the submarine plunges effectively erase the signs and marks of historical context, signs and marks of fascism and anti-Semitism.”86

The setting of a submarine is perfect for Petersen’s victimization of the German soldier, because the very nature of the submarine removes the crew from any sort of historical or ideological context, in which the submariners might be implicated. Petersen (as well as Buchheim) places only one ideological Nazi in his crew, who becomes a source of derision for the rest of the crew, and therefore the audience. This contrast allows the audience to side with the crew “against the Nazis,” while forgetting that the crew themselves are supporting that very regime through their actions. The crew never operates in a German context, in which the Holocaust is occurring, while they fire upon British and American shipping. The medium of the submarine detaches them from the National Socialist ideology and the medium of film forces the audience to relate to their plight. The greatest strength and weakness of film is the ability to restrict the viewer’s perspective, so that the viewer only sees and considers what the director

86 Prager. Beleaguered under the Sea. 244.
considers important. For example, relating to the Allied powers is impossible in *Das Boot*, as they are simply unseen, faceless menaces, while the crew is a group of scared young men who are completely removed from any incriminating context. Petersen was able to display the fear and horror that the soldiers experienced, showing them to be like any other person, capable of terror, and worthy of pity, without forcing the audience to simultaneously appreciate the full extent of their crimes. The author of the novel *Das Boot*, Lothar-Günther Buchheim, used different methods to show the victimization of the German soldier, as his was a book project, and the same restriction of perspective was not possible. Additionally, his overdeveloped use of sexualized language to describe violent acts betrays a stronger connection to his Nazi propagandist past than he ever admitted.

**THE NOVEL *DAS BOOT***

Petersen’s depiction of the Nazi submariners as victims reflected the very same image that writer Lothar-Günther Buchheim depicted in his novel. Buchheim sought to portray the submariners similarly to Petersen, as young men who “were betrayed by Admiral Dönitz, who had driven them to their slaughter, and by the Nazi political system that had exploited their youth.”87 Buchheim clearly had no more desire than Petersen to confront the Nazi submariner as a character with agency. In doing so, he, too, avoided confronting his characters as perpetrators, rather than as victims. In his eyes, the guilty parties were Admiral Dönitz, who had thrown the young, unprepared crews into the war to be killed, and the Nazi high command, which operated as a distant body, giving orders without knowing what the war of the Atlantic was “really like.”

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This depiction of the war is somewhat hypocritical, as Buchheim was himself a propaganda correspondent, whose novel was mostly based upon his experiences at sea, conducting reports for the propaganda ministry. He was therefore, at least during World War Two, perfectly content to support and aid the very high command that he later denigrated.88 This history as a propagandist alters the novel’s perspective from that of a critical observer to that of a guilty party. As such, the novel seems to become less of an anti-war novel, and more of an attempt to shift blame from himself and the other members of the Nazi Kriegsmarine (Navy) to their high command, which, while unquestionably guilty, were not alone in sharing the guilt for the war crimes that the German military committed over the course of the war. Buchheim was, however, apparently not an ardent National Socialist, as he “was one of those who volunteered for the Navy only in order to escape Army service, after dodging conscription for as long as possible.”89 In light of this information Buchheim was hardly heroic, but the conditions of his service do seem to contradict any attempt to portray him as a former strong supporter of National Socialism. His book Jäger im Weltmeer (Hunters at Sea, 1943) was a propagandistic text of the war, and contained a preface by Admiral Dönitz himself, which makes Buchheim’s later deprecation of the Admiral and the rest of the high command even more hypocritical. Even so, his text received very little attention, and lay mostly forgotten after the war until the release of Das Boot brought Buchheim’s questionable past into the limelight. Additionally, “others who read Jäger im Weltmeer insisted that it was not propagandistic,”90 so opponent’s accusations that

88 Hadley. Popular Image, 141.
90 Ibid.
Buchheim, too, had been a zealous supporter of the National Socialist regime may have been exaggerated.

Nevertheless, his motives for writing Das Boot were undoubtedly questionable. He may have been attempting to, in some way, come to terms with his own service during World War Two, or to somehow confront the guilt that he felt at having survived the war, when so many of the men, with whom he served, did not. Thompson correctly points out that Buchheim was only a temporary participant. He may have shared the dangers with the crew for one patrol, but would then return to his “relatively safe and stable staff job,” while the others would soon head back out to risk their lives yet again. As a result, Buchheim could probably never “belong” among the submariners. He would always retain a special, separate status, and he may have felt guilty about leaving them to their fates. 91

Whatever his reasons for writing Das Boot, Buchheim intentionally created a graphic, visceral record of the war, which is intended to evoke a broad spectrum of emotions, from boredom, to fear to revulsion, and which does so effectively. Buchheim described scenes far more explicitly than any shown in the film, which more effectively imparted the horrific nature of the war in the Atlantic. He recounted coming upon the wreckage of a convoy and seeing a corpse with no hands, and “his face […] a burned out mask with two gleaming rows of teeth.” 92 Shortly thereafter, the commander seems unaffected, which Buchheim questions until he realizes:

He feels it all very keenly. He overacts, entertains his audience with observations and conjectures—just to keep us free from haunting scenes of nightmare and horror. But the dead seaman won’t leave me alone. He blots out my visions of the devastation around him.\footnote{Buchheim. The Boat. 177.}

This haunting scene of an enemy corpse was not recreated in the film version of \textit{Das Boot}. In this scene in the book, the sight of the corpse emotionally impacts everyone, even the hardened veteran captain. The sailors witness the human ramifications of the deceptively simple act of firing a torpedo, and come face-to-face with one of their victims. The corpse in the dinghy is no longer the ‘enemy,’ some obscure concept, against whom unrestricted warfare is both necessary and right, but rather another man, another sailor, just like them. All of the submariners who see him are shaken by the sight, and this response reflects the moral cost of war. Killing one’s fellow man is clearly unnatural, but firing torpedoes at other ships is such a detached method that men can perform the necessary actions without facing the human consequences. Buchheim, however, clearly indicates that when faced with the grisly ramifications of the war, the men are forced into inner turmoil; this aspect of war, the film avoids.

The film \textit{Das Boot} sanitizes the information contained in the novel to an extreme extent in order to commercialize it, but in so doing omits the very details that would have made it meaningful and given an honest depiction of the society and life at sea. Militaristic societies have a tendency to worship technology, and the Third Reich was no exception. fetishizing technology and its use in every possible application. Buchheim seems to have assumed this fetishization to a disturbing extent in a very graphic scene early in the book: “The Commander squats astride the periscope saddle in the narrow space between the periscope shaft and the tower wall, his face
pressed against the rubber shell, his thighs spread wide to grip the huge shaft." This passage is intentionally evocative and effectively brings out the sexual connection to technology that was propagandized in the Third Reich. It was vital to the military machine, and particularly on submarines, that the men needed to work more as a part of the machine than as human beings, and in many cases replace their sexual drives with machine functions, making war a sexual act, and accepting violence as a substitute for sex.

A similar scene that perfectly embodies this sexualized image of technology is in Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Kubrik, 1964). A film that satirizes the cold war flawlessly, Dr. Strangelove ridiculously depicts both the connection between technology and masculinity, and the obsessive reliance upon technology and the desire for progress. In what is probably Dr. Strangelove’s most iconic scene, Major T.J. Kong manages to fix the bomb bay doors on his bomber, just as the bombs are released, and he is dropped as well, still sitting on the nuclear bomb. As he straddles the bomb, screaming and waving his hat until the explosion, Major Kong satirizes technology’s sexualization (with the phallic bomb as his penis), as well as the sexualization of violence, and the release of sexual tension through destruction. Buchheim’s text, however, seems to be very similar to the very fascist, militaristic propaganda that Dr. Strangelove is criticizing. Buchheim’s use of this scene when the submarine is attempting to attack and sink a destroyer turns violence into something explicitly sexual. The act of stalking and annihilating the enemy ship becomes so eroticized that the captain is pent up with sexual frustration, and in releasing his torpedoes, the captain will effectively be committing a rape.

94 Buchheim. The Boat. 159.
After their ship's second attack and subsequent escape, the men begin to load the torpedo tubes again, and Buchheim's obsession with the sexuality of war is disturbingly obvious. One of his characters yells: "'A bit of Vaseline on it and straight into the cunt!' Ario hangs on the chains of the hoist and imitates ecstasy, as he throws himself into his work in time to Hacker's hau-ruck calls: 'Fuck me – fuck me – you horny goat.'"95 This scene is disturbing, not only for its lack of subtlety, but also for Buchheim's clear eroticization of the process. The perspective that he gives is not one of a horrified observer, but rather of casual fascination as his character is amazed at "how he can find the breath in the midst of this drudgery."96 Buchheim's depiction of this revoltingly excessive sexualized scene betrays his own fascination with the sexuality of violence, and the release of sexual tension through the perpetration of violence.

Buchheim once again equates war-time violence with rape in a scene shortly thereafter, when he writes: "the iron hymen of the boat, into which the torpedo-phallus is rammed. The jagged lips of the vulva. The rearing of the steamer cows. When the torpedo penetrates between [her] ribs and deposits [his] explosive ejaculation. And then the rupturing, breaking, moaning and breathlessness."97 In what is undoubtedly the most disturbing passage in his book, Buchheim depicts a scene of preparation for violence, which becomes an unquestionable rape. Not only is every act sexualized, but each step in the process is also violently sexual. Klaus Theweleit

96 Buchheim. Das Boot. 388. (translation mine).
97 Buchheim. Das Boot. 389. (translation mine).
describes the militaristic male’s desire to avoid castration by violating the feminine, thereby
maintaining his own masculinity. He writes that: “the assault itself can be seen as a symbolic
sexual act. It destroys the sensuous woman’s genitalia, which for the soldier males […] are the
source of a castration threat.” Although the “woman” is symbolic in this scene, Theweleit’s
theory is clearly applicable in the graphic violation of the feminine in Buchheim’s text.

Buchheim does not describe a sensuous scene, but rather a violent, destructive defilement. The
feminine is at first threatening (the “jagged vulva), but the male’s torpedo violently “ejaculates”
and the feminine becomes subdued. The German language shows the true gendered nature of this
rape that the English translation hides, as the German masculine and feminine pronouns provide
genders to the violator and the violated. Buchheim’s pervasive use of violent masculine imagery
betrays a fascist, misogynistic model of masculinity that clashes with his otherwise highly
critical text. He very clearly victimizes the men who served under the Nazi high command, and
repeatedly questions and critiques the regime, but he nevertheless retains the destructive, anti-
feminine masculinity that was promoted under that very regime.

**COMPARISON OF BOOK AND FILM**

Buchheim’s novel is paradoxical as his violently misogynistic symbolism contradicts the
anti-fascistic message that he extols throughout the book. In comparison to Buchheim’s work,
Petersen’s film is far more sanitized. He avoids representing such a violent and sexualized
masculinity as explicitly as Buchheim, but also depicts a far less self aware and reflective

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perspective than the novel. From the very beginning of the story, the film expresses a different message to the audience than the book. Buchheim victimizes his submariners without question, but he also delves into the complexities and nuances of events. Petersen strips the complexity away in favor of a clear, uncomplicated message for the audience to comprehend. During the scene in which U-96 sets out to sea, Buchheim describes the charade that occurs between the men setting out, and those left ashore. He writes that

Our crew on the upper deck act out the standard farce—how wonderful to be on our way at last! And the ones left on the pier pretend they’re dying of envy. You’re off on this splendid cruise! You get to see enemy action and grab all the medals, while we poor bastards are stuck here in shitty France frigging around with shitty whores!\(^{99}\)

This scene perfectly illustrates Buchheim’s divergent messages. He once again displays worrying fascistic notions of war and glory while simultaneously showing the inner workings of the event and the underlying emotions of the men involved. Buchheim’s contrast of “enemy action” with “shitty whores” indicates the superiority of violence to sex, and indeed the supplementation of sex with combat. According to Theweleit, something about “the act of killing gives [the soldier] the pleasure he can apparently no longer find elsewhere.”\(^{100}\) The characters in Buchheim’s novel are expressing their desire to escape from the far less fulfilling sexual acts that await them on shore in favor of the thrill of action and violence that give the soldiers what they truly need. Despite this clear exemplification of fascist masculine culture, however, Buchheim seems to critique it in this passage, as it is all an act for the men. Those who are leaving are truly scared of what awaits them, while those on shore are relieved to be back in port.

\(^{100}\) Theweleit. “Male Bodies.” 305.
if only for a short furlough. Nevertheless, both groups must fulfill their masculine expectations by showing their eagerness for combat and the release of violence.

The corresponding scene in the film contains none of the subtlety of this description. The film betrays no sense that these young men are self aware, or have any conception of what will happen in the coming months. This simplification helps in portraying the soldiers as confused young victims, but does very little to honestly show their experience and preparation for war, or portray them with any sort of free will or comprehension of what they are doing. Buchheim clearly shows that this departure scene is a very common occurrence. The men may not wish to set out to sea, knowing what awaits them, but they know their duty, and in order to save face, they put on a show, just as the men on the pier do. In Petersen’s film, it is crucial that the men are completely inexperienced, untrained boys with only simplistic, confused thoughts of glory, through which they are manipulated by their high command. The knowledge of the sailors in Buchheim’s book gives them agency, or at the very least, a self-awareness. The distinction is subtle, but it provides honesty in portrayal that is thoroughly lacking in the film Das Boot.

In a closely following scene, Petersen and Buchheim display their unwillingness to confront the National Socialist past during the rant, given by the commander of the submarine. Buchheim is more willing to address the hypocrisy of carrying out indefensible wartime actions, but still refuses to show his protagonists as anything other than starkly anti-Nazi. Buchheim uses Der Alte to reflect upon the hypocrisy of implementing actions in which he does not believe. The captain expresses his “disgust for Nazi propaganda” by saying: “bleeding the enemy of shipping

101 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 0’ 13’’
capacity, they call it! Destruction of tonnage. Heinies! Tonnage! It’s good ships they’re talking about. Fucking propaganda—turns us into official executioners, wreckers, slaughterers...”

At no point in Petersen’s film do any of his characters discuss their actions in such direct terms. Buchheim’s captain very directly identifies their actions as both “execution” and “slaughter,” which naturally betrays a very critical attitude toward the actions of his protagonists.

Nevertheless, Buchheim is never willing to portray his characters as ideological National Socialists. Although he is far more critical of their attacks than Petersen, he also continually sets them against, rather than with Nazi ideology. Buchheim (like Petersen) simply casts Nazism as an “other” with which the men must contend. They do not belong to it, as Der Alte succinctly demonstrates by cursing “them” and “they’re” propaganda. He never feels compelled to admit his own complicity in the Nazi regime by his obedience completion of his duty. Buchheim shows the submariners to be beholden to the theoretical Nazi High Command, against whom they can do nothing. This regime “turns [them] into official executioners” Der Alte describes it as if he has no choice, and he has become an executioner by no fault of his own. While this tactic shifts the blame effectively, it does not express much accountability for his actions. He didn’t become a slaughterer. He was forced into it.

Buchheim does acknowledge some of the complexity of the situation, however, and addresses the “self-delusion” that led so many to “do their duty” without thought. He recognizes the hypocrisy that is evident in continuing to commit such acts of slaughter, even while opposing them, and he addresses it soon thereafter. Buchheim’s narrator explains that:

102 Buchheim. The Boat. 96.
103 Buchheim. The Boat. 96.
Apparently he has reduced all problems to a single common denominator: Attack so as not to be destroyed. "Submit to the inevitable" seems to be his motto. But he will have nothing to do with the rhetoric. Sometimes I feel compelled to coax him out of his reserve, to ask him whether perhaps he isn't playing a game like all the others...whether it doesn't require an infinite capacity for self-delusion to be able to live with the conviction that all doubts are silenced by the concept of duty.\textsuperscript{104}

This passage neatly details both the hypocrisy of many German soldiers, and the way in which that hypocrisy manifested itself in their consciousness. Although Der Alte may not believe in the destruction of enemy shipping, he nevertheless engages in its demise for two reasons. He rationalizes his wartime actions as, essentially, self-preservation and duty. He allows himself to completely ignore all other his own personal feelings by "submitting to the inevitable" and eliminating a ship if he has the opportunity, but this philosophy allows Der Alte to avoid ever making a moral decision because the decision to kill becomes rational, rather than moral.

Ironically, despite his unveiled criticism of the Nazi regime, his life is based solely upon the deaths of others, as he must kill in order to survive. Buchheim also criticizes the idea that one’s duty exempts the soldier from any moral burden for their actions. While Buchheim steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the submariners as Nazis, he does criticize the oft-employed excuse that German soldiers argued after World War Two, namely that they had simply been doing their duty, and were therefore not responsible for their actions. Buchheim also clearly implicates not just Der Alte, but all other soldiers in this “game” of self-delusion, in which they willingly commit to their duty, rather than allow their sense of morality to inform their decisions.

Petersen avoids any acknowledgement of the submariners’ culpability for their violent actions in his film and instead focuses almost exclusively on their victimhood. Far from

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
including Buchheim’s musings on the hypocrisy of the submariners’ devotion to their duty, Petersen only includes Der Alte’s following rant about the British success in the war. This speech shows his respect for his enemy, but also sets the stage for the crew of U-96 to be victimized by their high command, as a much stronger adversary preys upon them. Petersen’s captain speaks directly from Buchheim’s text: “The gentlemen in Berlin seem to be working full-time to invent new epithets for Herr Churchill. What do they call him?”...“Sot, drunkard, paralytic...I must say that for a drunken paralytic, he’s giving us one hell of a time.”105 In the context of Buchheim’s book, this quote contrasts with the earlier discussion of hypocrisy, forcing the reader to decide whether to pity the men or agree with their destruction. The protagonists face almost unbeatable odds, in a ship that, while stealthy, is also not particularly well armed or armored. The reader must therefore weigh the goal and self-professed guilt of the protagonists (for their actions, if not their ideology) with their staggeringly high chance of destruction and unenviable orders to attack convoys comprised of ships designed to sink them. Both Buchheim and Petersen avoid showing any sympathetic characters as Nazis, and in doing so, refuse to come to terms with the history of the German soldier in World War Two, because it separates him from National Socialism, as if the regime and the military (or in this case, the navy) were two separate, if not opposing entities. Within this denial, however, Buchheim does acknowledge the “self-delusion” required to use duty as any sort of excuse for the crimes committed in war. Petersen, on the other hand, avoids all of the complexity and questions of responsibility, and instead simply focuses on portraying the submariners as victims, guiltless and without agency.

105 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 0' 24"
This strategy allows the film to completely shift the blame to the Nazi high command without acknowledging the responsibility that any soldier has for his actions in war.

Buchheim and Petersen very effectively build tension in their respective works during the combat scenes in order to create a sense of “claustrophobic tension, so that the audience begins to feel trapped along with the crew.” Due to film’s ability to restrict perspective, Petersen’s work more effectively victimizes the soldiers because the audience only sees what they see and hears what they hear. Buchheim’s narration, on the other hand, provides some separation from the action, as it is all described, and the threat is therefore somehow more manageable.

Buchheim provides descriptions of U-96’s movements, as well as the actions of the destroyers above, and this emotional distance from the action provides a very different impression for the reader than for the audience of the film. The book unquestionably produces claustrophobic frustration and suspense, not least because Buchheim describes the even in painstaking detail over fifty pages, but somehow the description of the threat gives it a definition that separates the reader from the menace in a way that the technology of film can overcome.

The film does not have to describe the threat, or even show it. The most claustrophobic, tense scenes of the movie are the scenes restricted to the inside of the ship, because the audience is forced to remain in the submarine as well. There is no opportunity for the audience to identify the threat, and they must instead experience the same disembodied, shocking explosions that the crew endures. This perspective more effectively victimizes the submariners because it leads to a greater identification with the crew. Buchheim’s narrator distances the reader from the fear, as

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107 Buchheim. Das Boot. 340-386.
108 Das Boot. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. 1’00’
his narration provides some sort of agency to the reader. Because the reader has a better sense of what is going on and the tactics the commander is using, the reader identifies with the commander more, which gives them a greater sense of influence than the audience of Petersen’s film, who are forced to identify with the powerless crew.

**CONCLUSION**

The release of the film *Das Boot* in 1981 was a symptom and sign of a conservative shift in German socio-politics that reintroduced strong feelings of German nationalism and a desire to redefine history that had been far less present in the political discourse in the previous ten to fifteen years. As many Germans grew more conservative, they began to question German soldiers’ guilt for their actions in World War II. These opinions were not new, but were rather revitalized in contrast to their relative submergence for the previous decade. This shift was preceded and accompanied by increased militarization, due to relations with Russia in the Cold War and an increasingly conservative population. As the West Germans began to see themselves as the United States’ allies against the Soviet Union, they also began to re-examine their guilt and redefine themselves as victims of National Socialism. Simultaneously, according to Theweleit, “German public spheres were being remasculinized. Germany, sharing the Western victory in the COLD WAR, is allowed by the Allied forces of World War II to re-win that lost Nazi war.”

Theweleit was writing about his own experiences in 1990, but Germany had been redefining its relationship to the United States, the Soviet Union and its own history for years. Although they perhaps did not consider themselves to be re-winning World War II, Buchheim’s

and Petersen's interpretations of the war showed a clear step away from self-reflection and back toward the outdated masculinity that accompanied militarism. Soldiers, by their reasoning, were not actually guilty parties, as they had only been following orders, and had, for the most part, been tricked, manipulated, or bullied into joining the Wehrmacht, and thus were not responsible for their actions. Even the United States sanctioned this collective memory-loss, as President Reagan made a speech at the Bitburg cemetery, claiming that soldiers of the S.S. were as much victims of National Socialism as the Jews themselves. This line of reasoning is absurd, as millions of Jews suffered and died at the hands of the S.S. and the Wehrmacht, who had certainly not received personal, unavoidable commands from Hitler himself. Such an attempt to shift all of the guilt to Hitler and his inner circle simply does not reflect the realities of the war, as it ignores the facts of their service, and serves only to comfort those who feel that history judged the German soldier too harshly, but provides no real closure.

The film Das Boot accurately reflected this attempt to redefine and rewrite the past with an image of the war that had been widespread in the two decades following World War II, but had diminished in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although the film was technically of the same era as other New German Cinema films, it did not reflect the aesthetic or intellectual filmmaking employed in such movies. Far from being a film that challenged the old Papas Kino by attacking the old, nationalistic, conservative films of the 1950s and 1960s, it hearkened back to them, once again vindicating the German soldier through his duty, as if he had no other choice but to attack the enemy and do so without self-reflection or agency. The soldiers also served as erotic subjects in the film, and provided an extra sexual aspect to the already phallic nature of the submarine and all of the technology contained within it. According to the film, the men were little more than
parts to a machine, but rather than criticizing this use of men as extensions of the motors and
gears that power the submarine, the movie eroticizes those images, showing affirmation for the
sexualized image of man and machine working together in unison. Such an affirmation is
disturbing in its acquiescence to the heavily propagandized image of the soldier or worker with
his machine, doing his duty. The image is hardly revolutionary, and shows an infatuation with
technology often present in militarized societies. This representation of masculinity, however,
was far less worrisome than that which Buchheim articulated in his novel.

In contrast to Petersen’s general use of images and symbols that adhered to the masculine
stereotypes that are common in militaristic societies and which objectify the man, and eroticize
his relationship to the machine, Buchheim’s violently disturbing imagery displayed some of the
worst characteristics of Nazi propaganda and masculinity including violent erotic pleasure and
sexual stimulation through destruction and the violent subjugation of the feminine. His desire to
redefine history appears to be an attempt to free himself from guilt, placing the blame upon his
superiors in order to avoid facing his own responsibility for his service to the Nazi regime.

Ultimately, Das Boot was simply a symptom of the shifting sociopolitical power structure
in Germany. As the government became more conservative and unconditional vindication of the
German soldier became popular once again, movies such as Das Boot struck a chord, because
they provided exactly the type of protagonists the Germans were looking for. Foreign depictions
of Germans in war were not particularly sympathetic, as American films often cast Germans as
ruthless, unwavering killers, while the French portrayed a similarly brutal image of German
atrocities. For example, after the First World War, which had shocked the world with its violence
and inhumanity, the French film La Grande Illusion (Jean Renoir, 1937) depicted Germans as
the antagonistic guards of the prisoner-of-war camps. Not only were regulations strict and severely enforced, but the German guards are also quick to warn the prisoners that they have orders to shoot any prisoner found outside the camp, and indeed do on several occasions. In addition, in contrast to the poorly dressed, sick looking submariners of Das Boot, the German officers in La Grande Illusion all seem to belong to an aristocratic officer class, which is rapidly disappearing, and the German officer, Captain von Rauffenstein cannot accept the changing world, and as a result, his demeanor appears snide and posturing.

Petersen, on the other hand, chose to contest this image with a victimizing one of the suffering that the Germans experienced at the hands of their enemies and their own high command. The submariners might not have been gloriously successful war heroes, but they were gaunt, unshaven, haunted-looking victims, which was even more acceptable. No one could deny that submariners lived hellish lives, rarely seeing the sky, constantly under threat of death, and even manipulated by their high command. Even so, their depiction as little more than victims of circumstance painted a portrait of a submariner that was overly simplified and sanitized. This deprivation of agency avoided forcing the characters or the audience members to reflect on the choices that they made, and come to terms with soldiers who, although they did their duty for the Nazi regime and may have suffered for it, nevertheless caused untold suffering as well. The film's depiction of the soldiers as simply victims without crimes was a wasted effort at Vergangenheitsbewältigung, and avoided the task of coming to terms with a national, familial, and sometimes personal identity that once condoned such violence and horror.

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