'Just another Kraut'?: The Wehrmacht Traitor as 'Good German' in Hollywood's Decision before Dawn (1951)

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Patrick Major[1]

Decision before Dawn (Litvak, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1951) is a story of line-crossing and moral realignment, reflecting shifting loyalties between World War and Cold War. In a film designed for a global but also a post-fascist German audience, universal notions of what constituted a 'good German', based on humanistic morality, vied with legalistic and nationalistic attitudes in a post-war West Germany emerging from occupation. It was a film, therefore, which trod carefully in the no-man's land of post-national identity, but still managed to trigger some of the hidden hazards buried there. The film tells of Karl Maurer (Oskar Werner), a German Luftwaffe medic captured by American forces during the battle for Alsace in December 1944. As a prisoner-of-war he is recruited by US intelligence and parachuted on a so-called 'tourist mission' back into Nazi Germany. As Maurer - code-name 'Happy' - roams war-torn southern Germany, non-German audiences become vicarious tourists, catching an imaginary glimpse of the other side, of conflicted 'good Germans' beyond previous SS/Gestapo stereotypes. In its export print, as *Entscheidung vor Morgengrauen*, it also allowed German audiences an empathetic, if not sympathetic, view of the 'other Germany', until so recently vilified by Nazi propaganda (Hake 2012: 69).

As a film designed for multiple audiences, its transgression does not operate in a single dimension, but speaks to different notions of loyalty, finding resonances with anglophone viewers habituated to antifascist messages, but also Germans seeking moral certainties in an age of denazification but also partial rehabilitation of anti-communist *Feindbilder*. Studio publicity called it 'a picture of the people who fought and suffered on both sides separated by the almost indefinable hairline boundary that made one a hero and the next a traitor.'[2] US audiences, too, were experiencing an inquisitorial age of McCarthyism, joining a crusade against communism which many Germans felt they had been waging for a decade already. Hollywood publicity departments therefore had to remain ambivalent when inviting home audiences to consider whether a line-crosser was a 'patriot or traitor'.[3] In order to square the circle of these contradictions, the filmmakers used a number of subtle post-

[1] The author thanks the British Academy for funding research trips for this piece. All translations from the German are the author's own.

[2] 20th Century-Fox Film Corp., 'Vital Statistics on Decision before Dawn', New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPLPA), clippings collection.

[3] Motion Picture Association of America brochure in: NYPLPA, clippings collection.

production techniques to produce two slightly different versions of the same film. The inherent risk, nonetheless, was that one film could never satisfy two sets of audiences.

An act of treachery might not seem propitious for audience sympathy. West German attitudes to the acceptable limits of treason were still in flux in the early 1950s (Kleine 2016). Leading resisters such as Stauffenberg had not yet become official martyrs. When former army major-general Otto-Ernst Remer, who had helped quell the ill-fated July 1944 putsch, accused the would-be assassins of being 'Landesverräter' or traitors to the country, a high-profile libel trial ensued in 1952, in the run-up to the movie's German release. Conservative critics would not accept that the price of defeating the greater evil of National Socialism might be the deaths of German soldiers, 'stabbed in the back'. Exculpation risked opening the floodgates to legalised pacifism at a time of Cold War rearmament. As late as 1967, during civil disobedience against the so-called Emergency Laws, right-wing publicist Karl Balzer still categorised the 1944 conspirators as 'traitors', not 'rebels' with a just cause (Balzer 1967: 8).

As Ute Wölfel has already noted of West German cinema, many Germans distinguished between *Hochverrat*, or high treason against the Nazi state, and *Landesverrat* or 'treason against the country' (Wölfel 2015). *Landesverrat*, which usually involves direct collusion with the enemy, betrays the nation. Yet both state and nation were shifting concepts under the Third Reich. National Socialism had turned the inclusive concept of nation into the exclusionary dogma of the *Volk*. Defending the 'people's community' involved combating not only foreigners but compatriots now ostracised as second-class 'community aliens', notably the Jews. By 1945 the NS leadership ultimately betrayed even 'people's comrades', sacrificing them as human shields and cannon fodder (Keller 2013: 365-417). Capitulationists were *'Volksverräter'*, as the party-cum-state became a law unto itself. It was only at the Remer trial in March 1952 that Braunschweig's attorney general, Fritz Bauer, forced the court to redefine the NS regime as an *Unrechtsstaat* or unlawful state, thus breaking the jurisprudential logjam (Steinbach 2000: 105).

Decision before Dawn deals not with prominent resisters but forgotten resistance by an anonymous corporal. Following the Wehrmacht Exhibition controversy of the 1990s, which accused rank-and-file soldiers of complicity in Hitler's race war, interest grew in the 'other soldiers' who did not simply obey orders: pacifists, defeatists and deserters. Desertion incurred charges of aiding and 'abetting the enemy' (*Feindbegünstigung*), 'war treason' (*Kriegsverrat*) or even 'preparation for high treason' (*Vorbereitung zum Hochverrat*). The penalty was often death and even persecution of family members. Only the end of the Cold

War signalled greater public willingness to exonerate Wehrmacht deserters, culminating in their legal rehabilitation in the Federal Republic in 2002 (Welch 2012).

Most absconders were more probably survivalists, not regime-changers. Occasionally, however, deserters became defectors, actively fighting alongside Allied troops. Most recorded cases involved desertions to partisan movements, including the later film director Falk Harnack, who crossed the lines in Greece in December 1943 (Paul 1995: 151). Only rarely, however, were deserters prepared to re-cross them and return to the Reich, such as Heinz Müller, parachuted in by the Red Air Force to reorganise communist resistance in Berlin. Indeed, most early literature celebrating collaboration came from East German quarters, where 'Allied' usually meant Soviet (Doernberg 1995). Conservative critics, on the other hand, seemed prepared to condone high treason conducted at a higher level and with more shattering consequences, simply because it was committed by Germans, for Germans.

Red connections and fears of a right-wing backlash dominated political discourse back in the early 1950s, as Germany's Cold War became entrenched. The young Federal Republic was facing the prospect of rearmament only five years after being 'demilitarised'. As Brian Etheridge has postulated, narratives of German post-war identity were at a tipping-point between World War II narratives, privileging anti-fascism, and Cold War frameworks justifying anti-communism (Etheridge 2016: 55-72). Just weeks before *Decision*'s US premiere in December 1951, the Adenauer government had instituted banning proceedings against both Remer's far-right Socialist Reich Party and the West German Communist Party. The movie became caught in the cultural-political crossfire, touching raw nerves in a young Federal Republic transitioning from occupation to sovereignty. Naturally, Cold War paranoia was not a German monopoly; the movie appeared at the height of McCarthyism which also targeted Hollywood. Director Anatole Litvak, born in Kiev and culturally Russophile, claimed to be under FBI investigation during filming (Viertel 1992: 109-10). Would US audiences identify with a turncoat? As one executive warned Twentieth Century-Fox boss Darryl F. Zanuck, despite the twist of using a 'good German' as hero:

> are we, in fact, glorifying a traitor ...who betrays his country, a man who helps cause the defeat of his own nation? Some people in the audience may find the similarity

between Karl Maurer and the arch-heavy of American history, Benedict Arnold, a bit too close for comfort.[4]

<A> ***Decision before Dawn*, 1951**

Decision before Dawn, like so many Hollywood productions, was based on a true story. Between autumn 1944 and spring 1945, America's Office of Strategic Services (OSS) - a proto-CIA - infiltrated some 200 German nationals into Nazi Germany (Heideking and Mauch 1996: 404-6). Most were labour movement exiles gathering political intelligence, but around thirty were POWs sent on so-called 'tourist missions', reporting Wehrmacht troop deployments and air-strike coordinates. A team of three OSS officers oversaw these missions: Peter Sichel, a British-educated, German-Jewish expatriate from a Rhineland winegrowing dynasty, who later ran the CIA's West Berlin station; Peter Viertel, son of German-Jewish parents, who had immigrated to the States aged eight; and Carl Muecke, a New Yorker of German extraction who had the distinction of arresting Leni Riefenstahl in 1945. These three, supported by a dozen staff, scoured France's POW cages in late 1944 for likely Wehrmacht converts. Agent infiltration was extremely hazardous – half the 21 recruits in January and February 1945 were lost (Persico 1979: 114). Safer infiltration methods evolved: US troops would temporarily fall back while agents went to ground, or they were parachuted behind the lines. Armed with false leave papers, 'tourists' roved the German rear areas for a week to ten days before exfiltrating (Mauch 2003: 182).

Sichel recalled that motives ranged from careerism and pacifism, to a few convinced anti-Nazis, 'men willing to die for their ideals' (Sichel 2016: 151-2). One such recruit, a 23-year-old Berlin doctor's son named Stabreit (code-name 'Jacques'), struck the OSS as unusually committed (Mauch 2003: 295). Parachuted into south-western Germany, Stabreit's transmissions eventually betrayed him to German radio detectors and in his bid to escape he apparently drowned swimming the Rhine. After the war, his fate caught the imagination of another OSS team member, George Howe, the unit's forged documents expert, who penned an imagined account of Stabreit's fateful mission in the novel *Call It Treason* (1949), which won the $15,000 Christopher Prize. (Howe's title derived from the Elizabethan courtier, Sir John Harington's, aphorism: 'Treason doth never prosper; what's the reason? Why, if it

[4] Michael Abel to Zanuck, 19 September 1950, University of Southern California-Cinema and Television Library (USC-CTL), *Decision before Dawn* (*DbD*) files. Arnold defected from the American revolutionary army to the British in 1780.

prosper, none dare call it treason.') The book was then optioned by Twentieth Century-Fox, before going into German translation in 1953.

The OSS connection did not end there. Peter Viertel, a former 'tourist mission' handler, had grown up in Hollywood, the son of émigré Weimar filmmaker Berthold Viertel, whose Santa Monica home became a salon for expatriate Austro-German antifascists, including Thomas Mann and Fred Zinnemann. Viertel junior co-scripted Hitchcock's *Saboteur* in 1942, before serving in the Marines, then OSS. It was in fact he who had personally recruited Stabreit. After the war he returned to screenwriting when introduced by family friend John Huston to Litvak at his Malibu beach house, where the latter was considering filming Howe's novel. Viertel, who later criticised OSS's ruthless use of these 'poor little schnucks' from the POW cages (Scheingraber 2007) - all strictly against the Geneva Convention - agreed to adapt Howe's novel (Viertel 1992: 67-9). If *Decision* has an autobiographical character, it is American case-officer Lt. Dick Rennick, played by Richard Basehart, who moves from despising to revering the sacrificial German pawns in the not-so-great game. 'A traitor's always a traitor', argues his superior, consoling him after Happy's failure to return; 'just another Kraut', shrugs his jeep driver. As Rennick stares back steely-eyed across the Rhine, viewers know better (Heeb 1997: 52).

Call It Treason depicts an agent who never came back from the cold, narrated by an OSS man seeking the 'key to the Meanings of Treason … because it has more than one' (Howe 1949: 8) - lines echoed in the film. 'Riches and risk and faith' (ibid.: 16) are the three motivations explored in Howe's novel. Maurer/Happy is a believer, a friend of the Stauffenberg circle, invoking Americanised ideals: 'I want to work for freedom, sir ... that's all. Für die Freiheit!' (ibid.: 66) Liberation came, of course, from outside, but he hopes that 'our freedom would come from inside the country before the destruction spread too far' (ibid.: 89). His American superiors are more cynical: 'if it makes him happier to think he's doing it for Germany rather than America', muses one, 'it's all the same to me' (ibid.: 92). As in the film, Maurer is contrasted with another line-crosser, Rudolf Barth or 'Tiger' (Hans Christian Blech), amoral and self-seeking, who survives the mission in a Mannheim cellar selling civilian clothing to Wehrmacht deserters. In the novel, Tiger is a disillusioned communist, but not in the film. The final member of the troika - completely absent from the movie (replaced by Basehart) - is a Russian, Paluka, who may or may not be a communist, but acts as an 'advance guard of the revolution: Hands across the continent, so to speak' (ibid.: 44). Happy's political convictions are never spelt out, although his fraternal internationalism may make him a fellow traveller. In the inquisitorial atmosphere of 1950,

however, any such sympathies were written out of the screenplay. As Zanuck insisted: 'Under no circumstances can we have Karl expounding a political philosophy.'[5] The hero's motivation was to be strictly 'moral'.

Like most Hollywood adaptations, the base novel was altered significantly by Viertel, often at Zanuck's behest. Viertel recalled how in the first story conference he was under orders from Litvak to agree to everything Zanuck suggested, however clichéd (Viertel 1992: 71). Zanuck pushed for dramatic content over historical authenticity. In the book, Maurer is shot as he crosses the sights of a startled German sentry, almost by accident, and not by firing squad; in the initial film treatment, and truer to life, he simply founders in the Rhine. This was not enough for Zanuck who did 'not know why Karl is such a hero':

> I believe that at the end we have to show that he has earned the right to have his story told. I think we have to show that he voluntarily gives up his life to save Rennick, so that Rennick can get back to the Americans with vital information. Karl is convinced that his beliefs are right; he believes he is not a traitor, and he gives up his life to back up this belief.[6]

Thus Zanuck suggested the opening device of a firing squad followed by a flashback to 1944. Indeed, Maurer is not a deserter as such; the novel highlights his efforts to evade capture. Asked in the film if he has qualms about fighting against his own people, he argues for a future greater good: 'I believe fighting against them now *is* fighting for them.' But the film personalises his choices: in one scene he has the opportunity to warn his father that his hospital abuts a prime Allied air target. Rather than compromise the mission, or explain his change of loyalty, Happy hangs up the phone instead, in a fit of self-doubt which revisits him moments before his own unhappy ending.

[5] 'Conference with Mr. Zanuck', 2 May 1950, USC-CTL, *DbD* files (5).
[6] 'Conference with Mr. Zanuck', 2 May 1950, ibid.

Figure 1: Karl Maurer/Happy (Oskar Werner) sacrificing himself to save the mission (screen capture from *Decision before Dawn*, 1951)

To keep Happy 'moral', he could not become amorously involved with leading lady Hildegard Knef, although Zanuck later worried this might cast doubt on his virility. Oskar Werner's Vienna choirboy looks certainly suggest the *verträumter Schwärmer*, the dreamy idealist, of Germanic national stereotype. Kaleidoscopic audio-montages of the day's conversations, played over close-ups of Werner's dark, melancholic eyes, occur at liminal moments between waking and sleeping. Happy's filmic self-sacrifice also follows subtle Christian motifs: OSS is concealed within a convent; he wears the sign of the (red) cross on his medic's brassard; the trio undergo a Gethsemane-like near betrayal in a ruined church; at the moment the spy is shot in the opening sequence, a church bell tolls; and his memory is 'resurrected' as Rennick vows not to let him be 'killed by forgetfulness', whilst standing beside a wayside crucifix. Nor did it harm Fox's publicity that Werner's own back-story echoed Maurer's: as an unwilling Wehrmacht conscript, he had been almost buried alive in a US air-raid, before going AWOL in late 1944 with his 'half-Jewish' wife and baby. Hiding out in the Vienna Woods, they then re-crossed the lines under Russian fire in April 1945 (Dachs 1988: 34-5).

For authenticity and economy, *Decision* was shot entirely on location in Germany, filming indoor sequences at Munich's Geiselgasteig studios. Fox producer Frank McCarthy, briefly assistant Secretary of State in 1945, pulled strings with current Secretary Dean

Acheson, to facilitate filming in 16 towns across the former US and French zones.[7] Both the Department of Defense and CIA were sent draft scripts, but neither raised security objections, only requesting the mild subterfuge that OSS become 'SSS'.[8] The studio received GI extras, Air Force fighter-bombers and mothballed Wehrmacht equipment. Unable to take up French offers of Tiger tanks for insurance reasons, Fox persuaded the US Army to lend its own tanks instead, suitably mocked up. So realistic was the effect in one town that 'a startled and obviously absent-minded spectator responded with a Hitler salute as a column of ostensibly Nazi tanks ground through the cobbled streets.'[9]

Location shooting had other hazards. McCarthy's diplomatic skills were tested in autumn 1950 when Würzburg's mayor got wind of Fox's 'anti-German' plot-device of a vital chemicals plant in the city, rendering it a legitimate bombing target. (Würzburg had suffered one of the RAF's worst firestorm raids on 16/17 March 1945, incinerating its centre and 5,000 civilians; there was no chemicals plant.) Matters escalated to the Bavarian state chancellery and Minister-President Hans Ehard, who lobbied a sympathetic US *Land* commissioner George Shuster. 'Negotiations' between *Regierungsrat* Kellner and *Regierungsdirektor* von Gumppenberg for Bavaria and McCarthy for Fox broke down when the studio refused sight of the script. Munich subsequently withdrew shooting rights, shutting down filming at 100,000 DM a day. Litvak then launched his own charm offensive, pleading for international understanding: 'Naturally I will show good and bad Germans, black, white and grey, if you want. But I believe I am doing something good for Germany.' Hollywood would be exposing Americans to a German resistance, he argued: 'We will show the destroyed cities, the bloody wounded, the starving children, the desperate women, we will show a people that is suffering - a suffering people garners sympathy.'[10] Filming resumed. But both sides could claim victory: in the English-language print the plant remains; in the German it quietly disappears.

Fox cast only two Hollywood stars, Richard Basehart and Gary Merrill. It was effectively a co-production, so large was the Austro-German contingent, witnessing US breakthroughs for Oskar Werner, Hildegard Knef and Hans Christian Blech. Wilfried

[7] Acheson to HICOG, 3 January 1950, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 59/CDF 1950-54/5251.
[8] Towne (DoD Motion Picture Section) to Muto, 12 October 1950 and Lawrence Houston (CIA Strategic Services Unit), 10 October 1950, NARA, RG 330/140/681. For more on OSS and Hollywood see Willmetts 2017: 77-114.
[9] 'Movie Realism Opens Old Wounds in Germany', *New York Times*, 10 December 1950.
[10] Hans Ulrich Kempski, '"Legion der Verdammten" unter falschem Verdacht', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 November 1950.

Seyferth, normally associated with wartime Ufa comedies, appeared as an SS man. O.E Hasse was perhaps the highest-profile pre-1945 supporting actor, known for, *inter alia*, *Stukas* (1941), and later starring in the resistance biopic *Canaris* (1954). Other Germans played uncredited cameo roles, such as Helene Thimig, widow of theatre director Max Reinhardt, as a head nurse; Werner Fuetterer, a silent film veteran, as an army officer; and Munich stage actress Maria Wimmer, a mother caught in the curfew. The Germans were coached to deliver their lines in English, before redubbing them in German. Tellingly, none belonged to the wartime diaspora supplying Hollywood with 'good' and 'bad Germans', most of whom remained stateside.

Decision explores various iterations of the 'good German', who had become such a stock type that the term almost invariably appeared in inverted commas, suggesting both fixity and irony (Schönfeld 2013). Happy himself is prompted into volunteering by the fate of fellow prisoner Paul Richter. The wounded Richter, played by Swiss actor Robert Freitag, is treated with compassion by his American captors, but arouses suspicion among his die-hard compatriots. When challenged, he responds that his only crime is passivity: 'Like most of us, I talk but I do nothing'. Yet his defeatist comments still provoke his fatal defenestration by a self-appointed kangaroo camp court. Other would-be OSS recruits file past the camera, only to be rejected: the well-meaning coward who will not risk the life just handed back to him, or Klaus Kinski's unctuous Nazi party careerist who has 'never been interested in politics'.

One successful recruit is Sgt. Rudolf Barth, a former petty criminal turned circus animal-trainer, nicknamed 'Tiger'. Barth, played by Hans Christian Blech who went on to prominent 'good German' roles in *The Longest Day* (Annakin, Marton, Wicki 1962) and *Battle of the Bulge* (Annakin 1965), is part loveable rogue, a ladies' man with a profit motive, part *Realpolitiker*, volunteering because 'you're winning the war'. Zanuck insisted on turning Barth into a more unpleasant character than the novel, sowing suspicions that he may have betrayed one fellow agent, and might act again. OSS values Barth's cunning, but he is a conditional 'good German'. When the film reaches its climax, he reverts to type, complaining: 'when I took this job, I wanted to live a little better, not to get killed.' The recidivist Barth is duly expended, unlike the novel, when he makes a last-minute run for it, only to be gunned down by Rennick.

The film is ambivalent in its negative stereotypes of 'bad Germans' too. Arno Assmann's Gestapo agent Ernst Brandenbacher squints through sinister, gold-rimmed spectacles straight from Nazi central casting. Gestapo authority is symbolically mocked, however, when a Wehrmacht officer removes the myopic, Himmleresque 'jam-jars',

querying if he will be able to shoot straight in them. Worried at too much disparagement, Hollywood's Production Code Administration wanted changes to an early script version of Brandenbacher's demise, 'to omit the present indication that Happy deliberately murders an unarmed, wounded soldier'.[11] Maurer thus dispatches his Gestapo pursuer in self-defence. Yet *Decision* establishes the black and field grey compartmentalisation of guilt between SS and Wehrmacht which would characterise so many war films. Wilfried Seyferth's sweaty and pudgy Waffen-SS corporal Heinz Scholtz confounds superman stereotypes. Happy looks more 'Aryan', but Scholtz is not a figure of fun. Showing off his looted jewellery (in the film's only allusion to the fate of the Jews), he is a nationalist proud of giving the world twelve unforgettable years ('they'll never get us out of their system'), enraged at suggestions that Alsace might belong to France.

A long sequence in both book and film occurs when Happy is detailed to care for heart-sick panzer commander Colonel von Ecker, played by O.E. Hasse. Ecker is considerate towards the young medic, and his love of fine wine and classical music place him in the venerable trope of the 'split' German *Kulturträger* who appreciates Mozart, while remaining capable of barbarous acts. Happy overhears him sentencing a deserter to death, despite pleas from the accused that he had only absconded to help his bombed-out family. When Ecker suffers a coronary attack, Happy momentarily hesitates before injecting the antidote, unable to take one life to save another, though the death warrant remains unsigned. Granted a wish for saving the colonel's life, he pleads for commutation, but is cynically told that the man must die to preserve the illusion of discipline and final victory. After Ecker and Maurer raise a glass 'to our country' – a toast with a deliberately double-edged ring - Happy moves on, past the sergeant's dangling corpse, a reminder that this is not his country anymore.

[11] Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, 15 September 1950, USC-CTL, *DbD* files (3).

Figure 2: 'So die all TRAITORS TO THE FATHERLAND!': Wehrmacht drumhead justice (screen capture from *Decision before Dawn*, 1951)

Another position on the 'good/bad German' spectrum is represented by von Schirmeck (Peter Lühr), a Wehrmacht officer parlaying with the OSS for a local surrender on the Rhine. Nevertheless, he will not short-circuit his chain of command when his superior is put out of action. Despite OSS encouragement that it might still be a risk worth taking, to save American and German lives, Schirmeck demurs. Rennick then lets rip: 'They're right to call you traitors because you've betrayed yourselves.' 'It's all very easy for you to say', replies the officer, 'but you were never in our shoes.' 'That's true', responds Rennick. 'And I hope we never will be.' This exchange encapsulates the dilemma of any film seeking transnational identification; to borrow from the German rendering of the shoe metaphor, could one national public ever inhabit the 'skin' of another?

The espionage device allows Happy to inhabit two skins simultaneously in a picaresque series of insider/outsider confrontations. Hildegard Knef plays Hilde, a prostitute in a Wehrmacht *Tingeltangel* nightclub (inspired by Litvak's nostalgic memories of his 'adoption' as a teenage cadet by a bordello in revolutionary Russia). Viertel avoided whore-with-a-heart-of-gold clichés. Hilde's corruption is explained by the horrors of war: a fallen fiancé and a child killed in an air raid. She becomes a sympathetic identification figure for all female viewers, as Knef sobs in self-pity: 'dirty, miserable and alone - there are thousands and thousands like me'. Although accusing Happy of bourgeois priggishness, she is an incipient 'good German', protecting him from the SS's watchful eye and symbolically

offering her redundant engagement ring to sell for money. For Hilde, Happy is a catalyst who 'for the first time … made me realise what was happening to me'.

Figure 3: Hilde (Hildegard Knef): 'there are thousands and thousands like me' (screen capture from *Decision before Dawn*, 1951)

The last 'bad/good German' is Tiger's nephew, Kurt, played by 12-year old Adi Lödel. The brainwashed Hitler Youth initially seems ready to turn in even family members to the pursuing patrols. Yet in a noirish encounter in a bombed-out church, chiaroscuro-lit by Austro-German cinematographer Franz Planer, he cannot bring himself to betray the cornered Rennick. In the film's most charged scene, beneath a Virgin Mary cradling the deposed Christ, Litvak employs no fewer than nine point-of-view and reverse point-of-view close-ups in a wordless exchange between Rennick, sinking into shadow, and Kurt, dissolving in tears. Kurt battles a lifetime's indoctrination, reverting from soldier of tomorrow to frightened child. But reality had no such happy ending for a boy actor typecast in other 'lost generation' roles: in what resembled a real-life *Germany, Year Zero* (Rossellini 1948), supporting an impoverished family in a ruined Hamburg, Lödel was to hang himself four years later, aged just 17.[12]

[12] https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0530425/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm, accessed 10 April 2019.

Figure 4: Hitler Youth Kurt (Adi Lödel) and Lt. Rennick (Richard Basehart) (screen capture details from *Decision before Dawn*, 1951)

<A>***Entscheidung vor Morgengrauen*, 1952**

Decision before Dawn's US reception was solid, but not sensational. It received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Editing, winning neither. The *New York Times* chief film critic, Bosley Crowther, had already lambasted Fox's 1951 sister film, *The Desert Fox* (Henry Hathaway), as too revisionist. *Decision*, on the other hand, 'considers treason as a pragmatic act and nothing more. No coloring, no character distortions, no eyewash of romantic tears are used here to make a turncoat action appear a display of gallantry.'[13] *Life* magazine made it its movie of the week, describing a country 'where the good citizens who go on doing their daily duty are only making the disaster worse and the only true patriots are the traitors'.[14]

The film's export to Germany was integral to Fox's plans. Decartelised Hollywood was haemorrhaging domestic audience-share to television. A successful foreign export could make a film. Whereas *Decision* had cost $2m, *Desert Fox* had cost only $1.4m, and had virtually recouped its costs from German rentals alone (Solomon 1988: 246). But *Decision* was released during a fraught West German rearmament debate and its counter-currents, the so-called 'Ohne mich!' or 'Count me out!' movement against the draft. Cold War demands for a German defence contingent reversed the Potsdam Agreement's calls for

[13] Bosley Crowther, 'If this be treason: "Decision before Dawn" has thrills and thought', *New York Times*, 13 January 1952.
[14] 'The story of a traitor and patriot', *Life*, 17 December 1951, p. 118.

demilitarisation. Dealing with the Nazi past by a third party such as Hollywood would test German *amour propre*. For antifascists, cultural diplomacy encouraging forgive-and-forget attitudes would be sweeping the past under the carpet; at the other extreme, neo-Nazis à la Remer bridled at sympathetic traitors. Reconciliation films risked pleasing no-one in a polarised, post-fascist society.

In 1951-2 a key player in the still semi-sovereign FRG was the Allied High Commission for Germany, HICOG, consisting of Franco-British-US commissioners, including America's John J. McCloy. His director of Public Affairs, Shepard Stone, had already ruled both *Desert Fox* and *Decision* 'unsuitable for Germany at this time ... because they would damage the interests of the United States in Germany and the cause of German democracy.' The studio then engaged in direct cultural diplomacy to reverse this decision, sending its president, Spyros P. Skouras, to Bonn on 9 November 1951, where HICOG screened *Decision* to 16 West German government officials. Only two found it acceptable, with 14 'emphatically opposed', since:

> A. It would further 'ohne mich' attitude in Germany by recalling wartime horrors of Allied bombings and general horror of war; both neo-Nazis and Communists would welcome it as support for their arguments.
>
> B. Subject of treason in Germany today is very much alive, and right thinking Germans are only now convincing others that twentieth of July participants were patriots. Twentieth of July situation involved Germans against Germans. In case of DECISION BEFORE DAWN, however, treason is that of German who goes over to Americans. This, it was felt by Germans present, would serve only to confuse issue of treason versus patriotism and weaken case of twentieth of July action.
>
> C. German participation in defense of Europe would not be furthered by such a film, but would, on the contrary, be retarded.
>
> D. Picture revived civilian nightmares of war. Women present were particularly vehement on this point.[15]

[15] HICOG to State Dept., 21 November 1951, NARA, RG 59/CDF-1950-54/5251.

Along with *Desert Fox*, a German release of *Decision* was put on ice, until, as McCloy stipulated, 'such time as my office would give the word'.[16] Skouras's attempt to go over his head to Washington, in January 1952, achieved nothing during a 45-minute interview with Acheson, despite the studio's promise to 'make pictures which would further the aims of US foreign policy abroad and support that policy at home'.[17] HICOG even pulled the movie from the second Berlin film festival in June 1952, much to the studio's embarrassment.[18]

As with *Desert Fox*, one way around was to work 'between the lines' of the script, in the dubbing and editing process (Major 2019: 222-3). Fox hired renowned Weimar playwright Carl Zuckmayer to translate the screenplay. Screenwriter for *Der blaue Engel*/*The Blue Angel* (von Sternberg 1930) and author of the anti-authoritarian play *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*/*Captain of Köpenick* (1931), as a naturalised American he had won renewed fame for *Des Teufels General*/*The Devil's General* in 1946 which set the post-war 'good German' archetype, of the chivalrous but self-destructive Luftwaffe 'man of honour'. Unbeknownst at the time, however, Zuckmayer had an OSS connection too. In 1943-4 he had drafted a secret report on the political leanings of the Third Reich's literary and artistic elite (Zuckmayer 2002). In 1946 he officially toured the US Zone, including Geiselgasteig, concluding to Washington 'that we would be making a big mistake if we neglected the themes of German internal resistance to Hitler'. This did not mean 'horror stories', but material for a new idealism, such as the story of Sophie Scholl and the Weiße Rose/White Rose: 'Youngsters must know and remember that Germans lived and died for the idea of freedom, for a free, decent, democratic way of life.' (Zuckmayer 2004: 201)

The German script is generally true to the American, but Zuckmayer added a trailer message which faced potential criticisms head-on. Despite conventional wisdom that the spy was 'probably the most despicable and infamous criminal', worthy of execution, he still asked, 'can there be an "extraordinary" spy? Is high treason always a crime?' Zuckmayer highlighted the protagonist's 'deep moral seriousness'; treachery was not glorified. This was a film made 'without hate' and where 'one people was not sitting in judgement over another': 'do not judge!' This credo and Zuckmayer's blessing punctuated all the studio's publicity.

Fox also undertook several cuts and re-dubs, to avoid offending German audiences. Shots of French orphans (presumably 'made in Germany') at the OSS's convent headquarters were cut from the German release. The dub explains that Rennick was 'of German descent'

[16] CINCEUR to Bonn, 28 November 1951, NARA, RG 59/5323/9.
[17] State Dept. memorandum, 22 January 1952, NARA, RG 59/CDF-1950-54/5251.
[18] A.M.S., 'Nicht für Deutsche?', *Die Welt*, 21 June 1952.

(hence his flawless German, voiced by Curd Jürgens). His early line in the Hollywood original, that he regards Germans as 'all a bunch of lice', ended on the cutting-room floor (thus destroying his own conversion story arc; in *Entscheidung* Rennick *is* to all intents and purposes German). An American bombardier turned parachute dispatcher, when asked if he hated Germans, no longer replies: 'I haven't felt sorry when I've seen a string of 100-pounders leave that bomb-rack'. The German print even features extra footage of Lale Andersen's sentimental wartime hit 'Es geht alles vorüber' (Everything passes), with added subversive anti-Nazi lyrics not shown in the US release, thus merging nostalgia and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (John 2005). The song provides a constant non-diegetic refrain in the film. And in the final scene, the handover of the mission's crucial military information is edited out, as OSS start marking up their maps for countermeasures. German audiences experienced espionage without consequences.

The ultimate arbiter of the film's German fate was the Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft, the FRG's censor. By the time Fox submitted *Entscheidung vor Morgengrauen*, the geo-political roller-coaster which had seen West Germany go from disarmed pariah to bloc member, had ended in May 1952 with entry into the European Defence Community (against considerable domestic opposition!). In June 1952, unlike the screenings seven months earlier to Bonn officialdom, the FSK unanimously passed a film which 'portrays in almost documentary style the conditions in Germany shortly before the collapse and will cause no offence to German sensibilities'. Any 'over-excitement' of adolescents (presumably by Hildegard Knef) was overridden by the 'film's high ethical value'.[19] Treason was no longer taboo and *Entscheidung* was finally released in the FRG in November 1952, many months after other European countries.

German reviewers were cautiously positive, often commenting on the realism of wartime sights and sounds, as well as the constant police checkpoints, which had been repressed in the psyche ever since: 'a Stuka attack on our softly slumbering memory!'[20] For some, it was a brave venture by outsiders into a market overrun with escapist 'tear-jerkers' and 'restoration films that act as if nothing had happened'.[21] One endorsed Litvak's description of Happy's mission as a 'patrol of the conscience'.[22] Indeed, subjective ethicality

[19] FSK, 'Protokoll der Prüfungssitzung des Arbeitsausschusses vom 19.6.1952'; my thanks to Eva Diaz of the FSK for making this available.
[20] Ba., 'Seine Kommandostelle: das eigene Gewissen', *Der Abend*, 21 November 1952.
[21] Hans Schaarwächter, 'Kein Makel ist an diesem "Happy"', *Der Mittag*, 4 December 1952.
[22] R. Keller for 'Filmeinführung auf der Bundestagung 1960 Flensburg', Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf (FUBKW) clippings collection.

was often invoked in mitigation of treachery. 'For the formal thinker espionage for the enemy is always *Landesverrat*', conceded one columnist, 'but does that answer the desperate questions of a burning conscience?'[23] Many reviewers were at pains *not* to draw wider conclusions for social behaviour from the film; it was an 'individual case'.[24]

Some were more political. *Frankfurter Allgemeine* noted the discrepancy between elite resistance and that of the little man: 'if a lance corporal ventured in that direction, it became treason, base treason, and the fact that he was crushed and forgotten, completes his tragedy.'[25] But what the film had omitted was the sheer dread of the advancing Red Army which had kept Germans in line. Other analogies were drawn, for instance with German special forces executed by US troops in the Ardennes in 1944.[26] Only some echoed Fritz Bauer's arguments that the NS leadership had forfeited obedience: 'There will be a lot of talk of honour and oath-breaking', warned one commentator, 'but in the mouths of people who made themselves tools of a criminal regime flouting ethical laws, these great words are empty babble.'[27] Others equivocated with arguments from the Cold War present: 'Do you call it treason if an eastern zone people's policeman defects to us to serve his true fatherland?'[28]

In one longer debate, legal, theological and military commentators crossed swords, including Fabian von Schlabrendorff, a 20 July survivor, who could not imagine a German-made *Decision*: 'Not yet. Something like this can only be done at a distance of 5,000 km or 50 years.' Would historical defectors in the wars of national liberation, such as Baron vom Stein or General Yorck von Wartenburg, who had pre-empted Prussia's break with Napoleon, be judged so harshly? Marion Gräfin Yorck von Wartenburg, a Kreisau Circle resister and Yorck's direct descendant, challenged the basis of any *ad hominem* Führer oath, praising instead Happy's new-found loyalty to Rennick. Author Hans Werner Richter, himself an antifascist POW convert, warned that anyone accusing Happy must also condemn the Scholls and Stauffenbergs, and possibly 'millions of people now living in the East.' For Richter, Happy was 'tomorrow's hero', an internationalist transcending yesterday's last-ditch nationalism. Ex-army major Herbert Busse, while conceding Happy's good intentions, still regarded his action as a 'deadly mistake', hitting not state nerve-centres, but comrades-in-arms. Theologian Hans Köhler conceded that a moral imperative might trump temporal

[23] Gerhard Daub, 'Patriot oder Verräter?', *Deutscher Kurier*, 22 November 1952.
[24] Gunter Groll, 'Zeitbild und Zündstoff', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 November 1952.
[25] Robert Held, 'Nenn' es Verrat', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 November 1952.
[26] E.S., 'Der Überläufer', *Deutsche Wirtschaftszeitung*, 29 November 1952.
[27] Günter Ebert, 'Nenn' es nicht Verrat!', *Das Freie Wort*, 13 December 1952.
[28] D.A., 'Ein Film fragt: WAR ES VERRAT?', *Der Abend*, 20 November 1952.

legality, but only if the state had breached God's laws. For Wilhelm Silgradt, a Berlin conservative, Happy was simply an 'evil fool' fumbling with 'anarchistic dynamite'. Only journalist Erich Kuby, who had himself spent nine months in a Wehrmacht stockade, reminded readers that they had watched a 'watered-down' version, designed for the 'forward bulwark of an empire directly threatened by communism'. If anything, it had not been provocative enough, and the feared 'white mice and stink bombs', which had disrupted *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone) in 1930, had not materialised. Box-office was slow. 'The film met with that famous German silence', observed Kuby, 'the silence of an exhausted people after twelve years of being shouted at and five years of re-education.'[29] *Entscheidung vor Morgengrauen*'s takings were indeed modest, making only a tenth of *Desert Fox*'s German revenue; 'a big disappointment', wrote Zanuck: 'We expected big things from it in Germany and yet it is an out and out flop' (Solomon 1988: 78). At the bottom line, treason never pays.

Contrary to Harington's aphorism, many West Germans still *did* dare call it treason, clinging to etatist definitions of *Landesverrat*. But things were changing, slowly. In 1953 the nascent Bundeswehr adopted the concept of 'inner leadership', which placed natural justice above positive law, and hence empowered troops to disobey criminal orders for reasons of conscience. Nonetheless, Bonn's memory guardians regarded *Landesverrat* as the unacceptable face of treason, explicitly threatening their 20 July rehabilitation project. What is surprising is the level of coordination between US and Federal German agencies over the cultural representation of antifascism. Germans were still not trusted to see quite the same movie as global audiences; spectatorship was not yet truly transnational. Just as the Department of Defense was prepared to intervene in 1950s Hollywood productions to uphold America's 'good war' (Haak 2013: 172-84), the State Department was capable, if not of stopping, at least of keeping 'good German' collaborators off West German screens at the height of rearmament controversies. Such censorship had been conducted with one eye on the pacifist left, championed by a rival East German state, and another on a resurgent right, but had failed to predict the hostile reception closest to home, on location, forcing the studio into its own small 'Munich Agreement'. Whatever its shortcomings, battling the elements and Bavarian red tape, *Decision/Entscheidung* had nevertheless broken the taboo of not mentioning the war, daring to present home front realism, not *Heimatfilm* escapism - a Hollywood film, despite its hero's name, without a happy ending.

[29] 'Entscheidung vor Morgengrauen: Diskussion um einen politischen Film', FUBKW clippings collection.

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