

How a Banned Movie Made It to Theaters... —and— An Interview with Heiner Carow

BY DIETER WOLF

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Die Russen kommen (*The Russians Are Coming*) was produced in the *Kinder- und Jugendfilm* (children's and youth film) artistic production group (KAG) in 1967-68, under the brief administration of dramaturg Willy Paech. Although the DEFA Studio for Feature Films approved the film, at the end of December 1968 the Central Administration for Film (HVFilm) at the East German Ministry of Culture withheld state approval of the movie. It was one of the last films banned in the wake of the 11th Plenum of the SED Party, which took place in Berlin from December 15 to 18, 1965.

DEFA studio administrators threatened to dismiss director Heiner Carow, because the withholding of state approval had financial consequences, as well as being a political blow to the Studio's image. To retire the film meant failing to meet the Studio's annual production goal and could have entailed the entire staff losing the year-end bonus. The film's editor, Evelyn Carow, recounted that film scholar and journalist Hermann Herlinghaus,¹ a friend of the Carows, became tremendously engaged both intellectually and in terms of spending time helping Heiner Carow. She pointed out that it is probable that the idea for the movie *Karriere* (*Career*) originated with Herlinghaus, and that later on Carow was embarrassed by having succumbed to the pressure of the Studio—in contrast to the original screenwriter, Claus Küchenmeister."²

Heiner Carow and the new scriptwriter Hermann Herlinghaus then tried a completely new story, unfortunately with a dire outcome. The result was the film *Career* (1970), in which Carow used approximately 30 minutes footage of his rejected movie as flashbacks. The original plot of *The Russians Are Coming*—a realistic portrayal of a youth during the last days of war and the first days afterwards—now merely played the role of a brief exposition within a story that was to deal with the opportunistically conformist attitude of a petit bourgeois man in the social system of contemporary West Germany.

In summer 1985, Heiner Carow was looking for a cinematographer for his new production with the the Babelsberg artistic production group (KAG), *So viele Träume* (*So Many Dreams*). His previous partner, cinematographer Jürgen Brauer, had managed to transition to directing and was working on his own film. Brauer recommended the young cameraman Peter Ziesche, who had acquitted himself well as the second cameraman for Brauer's historical children's film, *Gritta von Rattenzuhausbeiuns* (*Gritta of Rat's Castle*). Carow was not wed to using people of his own generation and was glad to give Ziesche the opportunity to shoot his first film as a cinematographer.

In preparing their work on the new film, they looked at the work print of *The Russians Are Coming* that Evelyn Carow had kept in her editing room, in order to get a sense of a visual language for the new production that would work off of Jürgen Brauer's photographic example. The screening for this small group of professionals made an unexpectedly strong impression, despite technical imperfections. The black-and-white version of the movie seemed to accommodate the historical subject. The dramatic story was still worth telling. Its antifascist and antimilitaristic message was still relevant. Two decades after the 11th Plenum, the accusations against the film—that it psychologized fascism and presented a false image of the period, as well as not showing the Russian victory as a liberation—seemed downright absurd.

At this point, honesty requires I recount an embarrassing memory. To me, in 1968, some of Carow's stylistic language seemed strange, even dubious—especially the very unusual phantasmagoric level of an imagined, carefree meeting between the young German and the resurrected young Russian on the shore of the Baltic Sea. Carow recalled that the scene was accused of pacifism in the style of "make love, not war!"—since the young people use a few words of English in their attempt to communicate. The title, "the Russians are coming," quotes a widespread saying in 1945, which was generally remembered as expressing fear, rather than hope of liberation.

¹ Hermann Herlinghaus, author of many film historical publications, was the 1st secretary of the GDR's Association for Film and Television Makers at that time.

² The author spoke with editor Evelyn Carow in February and March, 2016. Evelyn Carow authorized the information recorded here. She also shared in an email: "Heiner had found his style with this film. And I had edited the flashbacks without the fade-ins, fade-outs and cross-fades that were usually done. Until this day, I'm moved by the final scene, but I regret that we did not translate Victor's last words 'People, where are you?' or add them as an insert at the end of the film."

The movie tells the story of sixteen-year-old Günter, who is steeped in fascist education and propaganda and the misuse of moral values such as fidelity, bravery, and obedience. He becomes complicit in the death of a young Russian forced laborer of his own age, by participating in the hunt for the fugitive; he is the first to track him down and comes face to face with him, without anticipating that the young Russian will be shot. Only after the liberation, once he has been taken into custody, does he gain understanding of his personal complicity and the monstrosity of the past. This transformation occurs through a confrontation with a rigorous Soviet officer and time spent with a companionable young Russian, who looks exactly like the murdered enemy of yesteryear (Viktor Perevalov was cast in both parts). In an act of moral self-defense, he rejects all further association with the real murderer, a subservient, run-of-the-mill policeman. Günter's psychological collapse is both the end and a possible new beginning of life.

However, how would Hans Dieter Mäde, general director of the DEFA Studio for Feature Films in the late 1980s, respond to the request of the Babelsberg KAG to present an unchanged version of *The Russians Are Coming* to a wider public... when doing so would not only disavow the earlier ban, but also potentially kick off a debate about the other movies banned in 1965-66? Despite many new skirmishes—and the cancellation of Carow's film project for a rock opera, *Paule Panke*, based on the 1982 show of the rock band Pankow³—Mäde was surprisingly receptive and immediately and wholeheartedly agreed to show the movie. He did not want to continue down this path without a collective consultation, however, as he needed the studio's backing with regard to HVFilm. And finally, additional money to make a final, screening version of the movie would have to be made available outside of what had already been planned.

Up to this point Heiner Carow had not contacted Claus Küchenmeister, the screenwriter of *The Russians Are Coming*; he gave me the task of passing the news on to him. Küchenmeister was surprised and touched. He said that he'd never understood the ban and that he'd only accepted using material for the flashbacks in the movie *Career* out of solidarity with the director.⁴

The screening of a rough cut was scheduled for November 11, 1986. This screening and discussion with DEFA's general manager was attended by: SED Party Secretary Dr. Rainer Mihan; DEFA's directing dramaturg, Prof. Dr. Rudolf Jürschik; main dramaturgs Thea Richter, Werner Beck, Andreas Scheinert, and Dieter Wolf; editorial director Wolfgang Predel; FDJ Secretary Thomas Wilkening;⁵ and, of course, Heiner and Evelyn Carow.

As the chief dramaturg of the Babelsberg KAG, I was charged with writing the group response to the rough cut.⁶ Due to its procedural and tactical uniqueness, it is worth quoting this document:

1. Regarding the work situation: The movie shot, but not completed in 1968 was now brought into screenable condition by director Heiner Carow, with the support of editor Evelyn Carow. It follows the film's original intentions and exists in a reproducible inter-negative as source material for [35mm] theatrical copies.
2. The topic and the historic conflict point to a very personal generational connection with Heiner Carow's sphere of experience and development. At that time, director Konrad Wolf had agreed to present this film in relation to *Ich war neunzehn (I Was Nineteen)*,⁷ and thus juxtapose and connect the culture-political and reception context of the fates of these two young Germans on either side of the frontline dividing worlds. The artistic status of the filmmakers and their work and the continuing, even increasing topicality of the individual's moral decision for or against war and fascism prompted [DEFA's] general manager to charge Heiner Carow with securing and processing the material and allow a formal rough cut discussion in the executive committee.
3. All participants, bar none, deem the rough cut as a thematically and politically meaningful, artistically sophisticated, and cinematically effective achievement, which has a place, today more than ever, in the tradition of antifascist DEFA feature films and which absolutely deserves a speedy release. The straightforward story

³ See: Wolf, Dieter. *Gruppe Babelsberg: Unsere nicht gedrehten Filme*. Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 2000. 238.

⁴ The name Claus Küchenmeister appears as co-author in the credits of *Career*, since materials of his movie *The Russians Are Coming*, in which he was involved, were made use of.

⁵ Thomas Wilkening, a graduate in production from the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (Academy for Film and Television) in Potsdam-Babelsberg, was for quite some time the full-time FDJ (Free German Youth Organization) secretary before he became the head of the *Nachwuchsgruppe* (junior talent group) and, soon afterwards, the founding head of the DaDaeR KAG, and finally an independent producer.

⁶ Dieter Wolf, *Decision Statement by the Chief Dramaturg*. November 13, 1986. Author's personal archive.

⁷ Konrad Wolf was the director of *Ich war neunzehn (I Was Nineteen, 1968)*.

achieves extraordinarily suggestive power, not only due to a nuanced depiction of the juvenile heroes by Gerhard Krause [Melzer], Viktor Perevalov, and Dorothea Meissner, but also due to the depiction of the adults' social environment (the mothers Lissy Tempelhof and Karla Runkehl, the father Rolf Ludwig, the teacher Norbert Christian, the policeman Hans Hardt-Hardtloff). A particular thematic and artistic value is found in the concept and depiction of the Soviet figures (e.g., Vsevolod Safonov as the interrogating officer). The movie thus joins the ranks of the best artistic testimonies about the liberation and the Soviet liberators of our people from fascism and imperialistic war, without any declarative relevance.

All participants in the discussion—including those seeing the movie for the first time and those who knew it from before—said they were touched by the powerful directness and freshness of the artistic and emotional impression that the 20-year-old material made upon viewing. Shot in black-and-white in the now rare Cine[maScope]-format gives the film the vigor of a youthful artistic document, with at-times oppressive intimacy. The seductiveness of Nazi propaganda, with its brazen abuse of positive values, is exposed; by using quotes from the fascist movie *Kolberg*, the film reveals mechanisms of imperialistic manipulation of young people through the medium of film.⁸

4. The following actions need to be taken to ensure that the film can be shown in public:

Some image sequences are still not optimal, despite intense technical efforts in the DEFA Documentary Film Studio laboratory, and must be copied again. For this, we will try to use negative materials from the movie *Career*. The material aesthetics of the historical artistic document, however, should be consciously used, as they make the image and the camera style of the work so captivating: advantageous of black-and-white for extreme contrasts, absolutely purposeful graphic effects. The credits need to be done anew, in accordance with the quality and character of the material from the Moser company. For a few scenes mixing or remixing will be necessary. Financial needs are very low. Previously settled rights questions, with regard to image and musical quotes, are currently being checked.⁹

5. A clarification for public screenings is recommended, to the effect that the movie is neither factually nor temporally connected to works discussed during or after the 11th Plenum in 1965-66. We imagine screening opportunities especially in film clubs, art house theaters or during art film festivals under the heading *The Special Film*. As far as foreign countries are concerned, licensing for all countries could be considered, especially screenings in GDR cultural centers [abroad] and as part of DEFA retrospectives. The movie should definitely be introduced to the Soviet purchasing delegation at the next opportunity.

6. Considering the special condition of the film, we request a clarification of the opinion and reaction of HVFilm and its endorsement of the film's completion, as well as of the application for state approval.

From this point on, working on *The Russians Are Coming* got the green light; for technical reasons, it lasted almost one year. Despite an impressive world premiere on December 3, 1987 in the International cinema in Berlin, reception was mixed. The critics showed respect for the film; however, aging and technical imperfections [of the film stock] hampered a broader public response.

A few 35 mm copies were distributed for national screenings, and the International Film Festival in West Berlin screened the movie in their Panorama program in 1988.

⁸ *Kolberg* (1945, dirs. Veit Harlan, Wolfgang Liebeneiner) was one of the last films produced during the Third Reich. It was used as propaganda to force German soldiers and the German population to resist the Allies.

⁹ About 1000 DM were demanded for royalties for the Nazi song "Unsre Fahne flatter uns voran" (composer Hans Borgmann) by Ufa-Ton-Verlag. As far as the quotes from the movie *Kolberg* were concerned, the GDR was able to invoke the law from the Allied Joint Control Council concerning the expropriation of the film assets of the Third Reich from August 2, 1949 that terminated the copyrights. Copies in Soviet possession came into the State Film Archive of the GDR and so the Ufa-filmstock, which was owned by Taurus-Film, did not need to be utilized.

An Interview with Heiner Carow

As the head of the Babelsberg artistic production group (KAG), I conducted a conversation with director Heiner Carow in fall 1987. It was initially meant for the DEFA Studio's in-house magazine, *DEFA-Blende*.¹⁰ At the same time, however, the DEFA press office used this interview as background material and information for film journalists. Back then only excerpts of the interview, here unabridged, were published, which were probably intended to appease the augurs more than to influence the critics.

Dieter Wolf: *Heiner Carow, the material for your film was shot in 1968. Now you've picked it up and finished it. How did this happen?*

Heiner Carow: We'd all almost forgotten about the movie. While we were preparing our most recent film, we looked at the material for *Russians* again, for purely professional reasons. We were all very surprised at how fresh and topical it had remained. Particularly today, this movie about the days of liberation seems to be urgently needed, in light of the still strong anti-Soviet fears that are stirred up around the world.

D.W.: *At the start of the movie, you included a beautiful idea as an insert: "If I look back into my childhood, it's as if I'm seeing images from an old movie."*

H.C.: This is not only an allusion to the particular aesthetic quality of the image material, it is also an important, content-related reference. The end of the war and the new beginning thereafter are reflected in the dramatic and tragic experiences of young people, especially the 15 [16]-year-old hero. These childhood and adolescent events were decisive for me and my generation—in a way they influenced our entire lives. Still, in the meanwhile much has passed over these memories, a lot of it is hardly palpable anymore. Today, the almost graphic images, almost like paper cutouts, convey something of this peculiar mix of great distance and oppressive closeness—how these have kept hold of our memories and dreams, as an ever-present exhortation for peace.

D.W.: *You dedicated this movie to [director] Konrad Wolf, as you wrote in the opening credits. How did you decide upon this?*

H.C.: Konrad Wolf liked this movie very much. Several times before his death we discussed screening it together with *I Was Nineteen*—maybe at the Academy [of Arts]. After all, [the two films depict] two German childhoods in the same period, which, although separated by frontlines, still stand in close national relation to one another. Unfortunately, we never got that far, back then.

D.W.: *Does your movie have a strong autobiographical aspect, like Konrad Wolf's movie? Your co-author on the script, Claus Küchenmeister, played a small, but accentuated, episodic part in the movie.*

H.C.: Yes, the movie definitely has very strong personal aspects for both of us. In his film part,¹¹ Claus Küchenmeister created a portrait resembling his own father with great verisimilitude: a resistance fighter who has to hide his thoughts and attitudes, and yet makes them known in the guise of a man who is not all there. In contrast, I was one of those boys who joined the *Volkssturm*,¹² in the strong belief that we could win the final victory, even at the cost of our own life. This was actually my childhood, just without my film hero's tragic involvement in the violent death of a Russian forced laborer of his own age.

D.W.: *The movie's particular history also bears the stamp of special stylistics, the signature of Heiner Carow, and of course also the characteristic traits of films shot at the end of the 1960s. How do you view this intensely expressive black-and-white movie in today's colorful cinematic landscape towards the end of the 1980s?*

H.C.: We had no negative for the film, because parts of it had been used in 1970 to make *Career*. We were therefore forced to use the mediocre inter-negative as our starting material. Now it really looks like an old movie; but you get the impression that this contributes to an especially strong, authentic effect. We hope the audience will not disregard it out of embarrassment, but will instead experience it as a component of exactly this: the depiction of a very distant time, in which breathtaking things took place.

¹⁰ "Im Dezember im Kino: *Die Russen kommen*. Dieter Wolf im Gespräch mit Heiner Carow." *DEFA-Blende*, November/December, 1987

¹¹ Editor's Note: Claus Küchenmeister's role as Willi resembles his own father.

¹² The *Volkssturm* was a German national militia established during the last months of WWII.

D.W.: *The re-encounter with the past simultaneously becomes a fresh encounter with the history of our national cinematography. We experience once again unforgotten, and in these roles unforgettable character actors who are no longer alive today; we see, as in many other Carow movies, memorable faces of lay actors.*

H.C.: The two lead actors, the German and the Russian boy, were lay actors, and I lost track of them completely. I very much enjoyed working with Norbert Christian (as the high-school teacher and WWI veteran), Hans Hardt-Hardtloff (as the zealous policeman), and Karla Runkehl (as one of the mothers). It is painful that we have already lost them; we will miss them even more after seeing them on screen again. However, it is also a fitting remembrance of them and their dedicated, passionate work.

D.W.: *When you are completing a movie that was started more than 20 years ago, do you not want to add experiences you've gained in the interim? Any matured decisions, any professional and artistic revisions?*

H.C.: Normally, it is certainly like that. But when we really began working on the project, we realized that back then we'd worked with great inner effort and tremendous thoroughness. We were thus able to focus on completing the movie in the way it was initially conceived, started and shot. We took no corrective action through dubbing, or with new music—which would have destroyed the authenticity and consistency of the work. There are, of course, both beautiful and painful feelings while re-encountering your earlier work. You think about it and reflect on what you have thought, felt, and experienced in the meantime and over the years, what you fought for, what you tried to push through, and how you wanted to express yourself. It is also a re-encounter with all the contradictions we have encountered in the meantime, with which we grapple today. The screening of the movie will be a part of this, our living history. And this is good.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz and Skyler Arndt-Briggs.

The texts “How a Banned Movie Made It to Theaters...” is a 2016 revised version, authorized by Evelyn Carow, of a chapter in Dieter Wolf's unpublished manuscript *Gruppe Babelsberg - Unsere 97 Filme* (2005).

Dieter Wolf was the chief dramaturg of the Solidarität KAG, from 1961 to 1963, and Babelsberg KAG, from 1964 to 1990, at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. He has worked with many famous authors—including Wolfgang Held, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, Günther Rücker and Harry Thürk—and has been involved in the production of acclaimed films by important directors, including *The Russians Are Coming*, by Heiner Carow.