

Routledge Studies in Second World War History

THE NOVEL *DAS BOOT*, POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND GERMANY'S NAZI PAST

Dean J. Guarnaschelli



The Novel *Das Boot*, Political Responsibility, and Germany's Nazi Past

This study investigates the relationship between Lothar-Günther Buchheim (1918–2007), his bestselling 1973 novel *Das Boot* (The Boat), and West Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

As a war reporter during the Battle of the Atlantic, Buchheim benefitted from distinct privileges, yet he was never in a position of power. Almost thirty years later, Buchheim confronted the duality of his own past and railed against what he perceived to be a varnished public memory of the submarine campaign. Michael Rothberg's theory of the implicated beneficiary is used as a lens to view Buchheim and this duality. *Das Boot* has been retold by others worldwide because many people claim that the story bears an anti-war message. Wolfgang Petersen's critically acclaimed 1981 film and interpretations as a comedy sketch, a theatrical play, and a streamed television sequel have followed. This trajectory of Buchheim's personal memory reflects a process that practitioners of memory studies have described as transnational memory formation. Archival footage, interviews, and teaching materials reflect the relevance of *Das Boot* since its debut. Given the debates that surrounded Buchheim's endeavors, the question now raised is whether Germany's "mastering the past" serves as a model for other societies analyzing their own histories.

Sitting at the intersection of History, Literature, and Film Studies, this is an unprecedented case study depicting how the pre- and postwar times affected writers and others caught in the middle of the drama of the era.

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For Tina, Sophia, and Lucy

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Introduction: Lothar-Günther Buchheim's *Das Boot*

Memory and the Nazi past

Despite the legacy of psychological damage that followed the collapse of the Third Reich, the Federal Republic of Germany envisioned obtaining what Robert G. Moeller has described as a “usable past.”¹ Driven by both outside influences, such as the Allied presence in Germany after 1945 and internal ones by political leaders and intellectuals, the goal was to integrate Germans into European society. As a backdrop to the postwar years, the Sachsenhausen and Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals were a reminder to the world that Nazi war crimes had been defined and the perpetrators brought to justice. In the postwar decades, West German writers offered readers a way to deal with their recent history in a medium where intricate levels of apology, self-reflection, and criticism intertwined.²

The present study argues that Lothar-Günther Buchheim's 1973 bestselling autobiographical novel *Das Boot* became an important intervention in German postwar political responsibility after the book's reception underwent what the field of memory studies calls transcultural memory formation. The unexpected, record-breaking sales upon its debut catapulted Buchheim's memoir about the Battle of the Atlantic into the realm of popular literature, which in turn prevented it from undergoing serious analysis in the comparative literature field as it existed then. As a result, *Das Boot* was not recognized as a part of Germany's collective memory of World War II until well after Bavaria Films released *Das Boot* as a major studio film 1981. At that point the arbiters of Germany's higher culture, those overseeing contributions to its intellectual and national identities, reacted instead to the international debates on the narrative that resounded later. Director Wolfgang Petersen's critically-acclaimed director's cut, shown on German television in 1985, created further discourse among the generations about how the war was to be remembered.

The history of *Das Boot*, from manuscript all the way to its status at present as a digital-age franchise, illustrates the research goals of memory studies. Published autobiographies like *Das Boot* are also artifacts that transport memories across borders to reach younger generations, and this shows us that national histories are intertwined. The contesting of memories provided by such works allows for a subtle, yet ever-expanding understanding of the past.

Over the last few decades, the discipline of memory studies has had a variety of leading themes, such as victimhood and trauma. With an understanding of Buchheim's intentions, we gain insight into the process by which a nation confronts its violent past and transitions into a new phase of modernity. Much like a domino effect, Germany's working through the horrors of its past with the aid of modern media forms was the catalyst for the postwar generation in other nations such as Norway to question its own involvement in the same conflict and how it commemorated that time.

Buchheim (1918–2007) studied art formally in Dresden and Munich. Drafted in 1940, his artistic abilities were the key points in his immediate assignment as a war reporter for the German Navy in service of the propaganda division. Throughout his career, Buchheim was never in a tier of actors held personally accountable for war crimes, yet he was known by name among high-ranking Nazi officers for his photo-essays commissioned for the party's journals and magazines. Buchheim's ease of mobility during the war between occupied France, his own residence in Bavaria, and the National Socialist offices Berlin, is an example of his special status despite his never being in command of anyone in the naval hierarchy to which he belonged. As a war artist and reporter for the Nazi propaganda department, his lack of final control over any drawings, texts, or photography assigned to him, capped off his influence within that sphere.

The obstacles in Germany's path to rebuilding its postwar national identity included matters such as growing research about the Holocaust, the tension within the Allied occupational zones, and the division of the country into two states that lasted until reunification in 1990. The aim of this period, what historians refer to as the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering of the past), was to provide Germans with a way of reckoning with the horror left in the wake of National Socialism so that the Federal Republic could begin its probation as a viable partner in Europe. The infamous West German *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) of the 1950s was a necessary step in national healing, yet the rapid shift in postwar Germany from near collapse, to an unprecedented industrial comeback, remains an anomaly for many scholars.³ The 1970s and 1980s saw an interest in historicizing the past, even if debates escalated and divided intellectuals into opposite camps. German scripted films in these years were a segue into discussions about guilt and morality.

For some historians, Germany's efforts to work through its Nazi past embodied a metaphorical line of demarcation or *Schlussstrich* (final stroke) that signified a welcomed completion of its road to democracy.⁴ In a poll from 2015, Germany's widely read magazine *Stern* reported that 58% of participants saw Germany's overcoming of its Nazi past as incomplete.⁵ At the beginning of 2020, the German multimedia news agency *Deutsche Welle* printed a poll with similar results.⁶ From these inquiries, the role of the past in present-day German daily life shows itself to be a tangible presence. The responses in these questionnaires also explain the surge at present in the interest in war-related themes in popular culture at present. Stories about

the Battle of the Atlantic, the hunt for escaped Nazis, and marginalized perspectives on the past, appear in new German in popular media like graphic novels, films, television series, and video games.⁷

Looking back at the history of Germany's grappling with its Nazi past on a national level, several controversial intellectual debates challenged the public's already uneven sense of collective guilt.⁸ Socio-political issues such as the heated *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) in the 1980s, and the controversial *Wehrmachtausstellung* (Wehrmacht exhibit) in 1995, are noted by some scholars as being examples of this challenge to public remembrance of the past. Both before and after these open debates, many Germans offered their perspectives on the past so that people born during and after World War II had access to critical reflections on the past. Some of the shared personal narratives are generally remembered as moving tales of redemption, such as the reflections of Lutheran pastor Friedrich Niemöller.⁹ Other personal histories were more difficult to evaluate in terms of guilt, ethics, and victimization, as was the case with Buchheim.

0.1 Thesis

Two factors surrounding Buchheim's novel point to the importance of understanding the relationship between *Das Boot* and German postwar political responsibility, which includes collective guilt.¹⁰ First, the narrative's metamorphosis from book to scripted film in 1981 was driven by others who were born after Buchheim's generation. This media change, under the supervision of non-eyewitnesses, makes it a prime example of popular memory formation as scholars in the field like Wulf Kansteiner have described it.¹¹ Second, the pattern of locations where both book and film were experienced, namely in Germany, then abroad, and then back to Germany again, illustrates what Astrid Erll has named *traveling memory*. Erll's term refers to narratives embedded in various communicative forms that leave their point of origin and become transnational if they are found by others to possess a relatable quality.¹² This is a key feature of postwar memory dissemination inherent in the history surrounding *Das Boot* and it widens the spectrum of findings related to historical remembrance.

Analyzing Buchheim's novel with techniques borrowed from memory studies shows why the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (mastering of the past) seemed to have consisted of as much controversy as closure.¹³ Postwar silence and conflicting accounts of the war were reactions West Germans had in dealing with their various forms of guilt, be it criminal, moral, or political guilt. This analysis of *Das Boot* contributes to the idea that memory and culture have no fixed boundaries. The path taken by the book after its initial reception reveals a deeper understanding of how striving for a national history means facing a wider set of parameters.

Buchheim's track record for both eliciting upset among war veterans, while gaining the admiration of much of the postwar generation, suggests