

Der Tiger, A German War Film: An Anti-War Movie or An Act of National Atonement?

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Abstract: This article examines Dennis Gansel's 2025 film *Der Tiger* through the historical, psychological, and moral dimensions of Germany's war against the Soviet Union during World War II. Set against the collapse of German military operations on the Eastern Front, the film follows a Tiger tank crew assigned a mysterious mission that gradually exposes the consequences of ideological warfare and unquestioning obedience to military orders. The analysis places the film within the history of German armored warfare, including the development of the Tiger tank, Operation Barbarossa, and the atrocities committed during the Ostkrieg. Particular attention is given to the film's circular narrative, fragmented memories, and recurring symbols of fire, death, and redemption. The relationship between Lieutenant Philip and Colonel Hardenburg reveals the conflict between military duty and personal responsibility, especially following their involvement in the killing of Soviet civilians at Stalingrad. Drawing on historical accounts, philosophical interpretations, and comparisons with other war films, the article considers how cinema represents collective guilt and Germany's continuing engagement with its Nazi past. The final revelation transforms the crew's journey into a confrontation with death and moral accountability. Rather than presenting armored combat as a spectacle of military strength, *Der Tiger* portrays the psychological burden of war and the lasting consequences of violence carried out in the name of ideology.

Keywords: war of extermination, guilt, forgiveness, dialogue in film

1. Introduction

The film begins eight months after Stalingrad, at a time when the Wehrmacht- which had advanced steadily until 1942- was in an inexorable retreat toward Berlin, which it would reach in 1945.

A Tiger tank, commanded by Lieutenant Philip, is tasked with supporting the withdrawal of Nazi troops hurriedly crossing a strategic bridge over the Dnieper River in the USSR. The armored vehicle engages Soviet tanks, artillery, and infantry in a desperate rearguard action, driven by the urgent need to clear the structure before it is blown up at midnight. Philip reads a small slip of paper as the last German soldiers leave the bridge. Since the enemy is not yet in pursuit and his protective mission is complete, the commander ought to have withdrawn.

As he reads the note in his hands, the anxious crew reminds the commander of the dwindling time left to abandon the site. With five minutes remaining before the explosion, Philip orders the evacuation of the bridge. The driver, Helmut, revs the engine amidst the others' shouting when the loader, Weiller, screams "Ilyushin", alerting them to the sound of the dreaded Soviet aircraft- as fire rains down on the tank. At that moment, a doe appears in Philip's field of vision. Their gazes lock in slow motion.

2. Tanks and Films about Them

In this 2025 film by German director Dennis Gansel, the tank is not a fascinating killing machine. Nor is it the central protagonist, as seen in the celebrated American film *Fury* (2024), the Russian films *T-34* (2022) and Karen Shakhnazarov's *White Tiger* (2012), the claustrophobic machine in the impressive yet overlooked Israeli film *Lebanon* (2002) by Samuel Maoz, or the multi-functional

vehicle in *The Beast* (1988) by American director Kevin Reynolds. *Der Tiger* does not turn armored combat into a thrilling- albeit sometimes historically inaccurate- mechanized duel, as seen in *Fury* (Niemi, 2018).

It is a psychologically complex film that structures its narrative through a bold temporal shift, reminiscent of Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. By revisiting the opening scenes at the film's conclusion, the film delivers a surprising final revelation. It critically examines National Socialist ideology; the ideology's infiltration into various strata of German society created a moral conflict between fantasy and reality within a culture that produced both a Goethe and the puny mastermind behind *Mein Kampf*.

The film immerses us in the greatest strategic blunder of the 20th century- the Third Reich's invasion of the USSR- which forced a nation lacking raw materials to fight a two-front war against an industrial giant whose potential had been underestimated (Higgins, 1967). By waging a war of extermination against Slavic populations, communists, and Jews, the Reich triggered a vengeful Soviet counter-offensive- a "blowback" that was visited mercilessly upon German civilians. *Der Tiger* represents an awakening to the absurdity of ideological warfare; the protagonist, confronted with the ultimate reality of existence and shaken by the atrocities of the *Ostkrieg* (Eastern War), is forced to confront his own actions and human frailty.

2.1 The tank: Genesis and Fascination of a Complex and Deadly Machine

The tank was born in 1916 as a machine designed to support Allied infantry crossing No Man's Land, advancing vulnerably under enemy fire. Troops were being decimated as they struggled- often unsuccessfully- to overcome the dense barbed-wire entanglements protecting German trenches

(Ogorkiewicz, 2015). Because they had to keep pace with advancing infantry, early British tanks were slow.

The French developed their tanks around the same time as the British- the Schneider and Saint-Chamont models. Their appearance foreshadowed the future turretless armored vehicle known as the "tank destroyer"- such as the impressive Soviet SU-100, featured in the film *Der Tiger*. Lacking a rotating turret, this type of vehicle functions as a self-propelled gun tasked with destroying enemy tanks (Ogorkiewicz, 2015). However, the definitive form emerged with the French Renault FT tank in 1918; its design established the machine's standard profile. Featuring a hull housing the engine and crew, it was topped by a rotating turret containing the cannon, antennas, and a machine gun.

2.2 The Next Generation Emerges during the Interwar Period

In the 1920s, the armies of industrialized nations- including Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, France, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden—developed and tested their own tanks. Theoretical studies justifying operational doctrines proliferated—such as those by British military thinker Basil H. Liddell Hart (1895–1970)- while experiences were shared and employment doctrines were consolidated (Addington, 1971).

German planners recognized the machine's importance, even though the Treaty of Versailles strictly forbade them from possessing or manufacturing such vehicles. General Heinz Guderian, a student of armored warfare familiar with British research, wrote in 1929 that he was convinced the tank would be decisive in future warfare. It would no longer merely support the infantry but would enjoy absolute operational autonomy.

Increased speed and firepower resulted in fast vehicles capable of traversing and fighting across all types of terrain, integrated into a revolutionary inter-service communication system involving artillery, infantry, aviation, and radio. (Guderian, 1965) According to Zaloga, the extent of these interactions should not be overstated, as the Germans-pioneers in this field- did not fully realize them until 1940. (Zaloga, 2015)

Disregarding the ban imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, Germany ordered three tank companies in 1927, disguised as light and heavy tractors. The decisive theoretical impetus came with the appointment of Heinz Guderian as Chief of Staff to the Inspector of Motorized Troops. He prioritized independent, concentrated mechanized formations as the core of an offensive combat force. (Guderian, 1965) Hitler's rise to power- driven by a passion for motorization- led to German rearmament and the expansion of the army and the arms industry, resulting in the creation of three Panzer divisions.

Unencumbered by previous constraints, the Germans designed prototypes featuring robust chassis and powerful weaponry. Due to limited production and an acute need for armored vehicles, they incorporated 469 tanks following the annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1938, and later, throughout 1940, added captured British and French equipment to their

inventory. (Ogorkiewicz, 2015) Following the Polish campaign, the armored arm reorganized its major units and implemented technical improvements to the tanks. (Guderian, 1965)

According to Spanish historian Carlos Caballero, the Wehrmacht during World War II was an army of limited means that cobbled together new Panzer divisions using war booty. (Caballero, 2026). The cornerstone of its armored force consisted of the Czech T-35 and T-38 tanks, which were successively modified- notably through the installation of more powerful guns—resulting in successful models such as the Marder tank destroyer (Spielberger & J. Spielberger, 2008)

The Panzer III and IV models, despite their slow production, became the backbone of the Panzer divisions. Germany did not adopt a total war economy; the process was instead near-chaotic and amateurish, characterized by a proliferation of bodies and agencies that weakened its war effort. (Kaldor, 1945)

3. Tiger Performance

In 1937, designer Erwin Aders of the German company Henschel drafted the layout for the Tiger I, which was subsequently discarded. In 1940, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche's company designed another tank; however, both Henschel and Porsche incorporated Hitler's specific requirements regarding armor, armament, and speed into their machines (Ogorkiewicz, 2015). In 1941, spurred by the impact of new Soviet tanks, a commission of German designers revisited the Tiger project, aiming to create a vehicle capable of contending with the powerful armament and armor of the Soviet T-34 and KV-1 (Ogorkiewicz, 2015). The reliable PzKpfw III and PzKpfw IV tanks were fitted with 75mm guns in 1942, but were soon surpassed by Soviet armor, prompting German tank crews to demand more powerful machines.

In 1942, after the designs were tested at Rastenburg, East Prussia, in Hitler's presence, the approved Henschel model entered mass production. At Hitler's request, its main armament was the powerful 88mm gun- an anti-aircraft weapon with proven versatility in the campaigns where it had been deployed (Jentz, 2000).

The weapon fired powerful armor-piercing rounds effective at ranges of 3,500 meters; while engagements typically occurred at 800–1,200 meters, accurate hits were recorded at distances of up to 2,000 meters. It carried 92 rounds of various types in its ammunition racks, 50 of which were armor-piercing. The turret was equipped with Nb.K. 39 smoke grenades (or Nebelwurfgerät), as seen in the film; these produced smoke screens to conceal the tank during evasive maneuvers against adversaries such as the SU-100.

Although used on the Tiger between August 1942 and June 1943, they were discontinued following a failed deployment incident (Fletcher, 2011). The Tiger was a complex machine whose sophisticated design made maintenance so difficult that the number of vehicles abandoned in the field due to mechanical failure exceeded the number destroyed by enemy fire.

3.1 The disastrous debut

Dictatorships are driven by the unyielding desires of their leaders. Hitler ordered the Tiger to be deployed in battle for the first time on the Leningrad front in October 1942. The terrain chosen for this debut was ill-suited for tank operations; the Tiger's drivetrain systems were vulnerable to freezing mud. Consequently, the immobilized tanks were abandoned by their crews, captured by the Soviets, and subjected to meticulous study (Speer, 1971).

3.2 The Tiger at Kursk

The second major test took place during the controversial Operation Zitadelle (Citadel), a massive offensive launched at the Kursk Salient in 1943. The start of the maneuver was repeatedly postponed to satisfy Hitler's desire to have the largest possible number of Tigers available in the field (Glantz, 1999). Nine Panzer formations participated in the Battle of Kursk- including six revitalized SS divisions- fielding a total of 2,450 tanks and assault guns, among them 133 Tigers and 184 brand-new Panthers.

In July 1943, armored warfare ace Heinz Guderian, along with other prominent generals, opposed the execution of Zitadelle. The Soviets, having learned of the concentration of elite armored divisions- a clear sign of an impending offensive- preempted the assault. They established powerful, deeply echeloned anti-tank defenses, thereby neutralizing the armored pincer maneuvers intended to encircle them. At the time, Stalin had expressed a desire to launch a preemptive attack, but Vatutin's counter-argument prevailed: he proposed remaining on the defensive to wear down German forces before launching a crushing counter-offensive. (Erickson, 2003)

However, new perspectives on the Battle of Kursk demonstrate the efficiency of the Panzer divisions; the Wehrmacht lost 278 tanks and assault guns- including 13 Tigers and 44 Panthers- while destroying 1,254 Soviet tanks.

4. A Demanding, Costly, and All-Consuming Machine

Germany created a new type of soldier for its Panzer troops- skilled and specialized—as described by the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte in *The Volga Rises in Europe*. At the start of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, this journalist from the prestigious Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera* was traveling embedded within a German armored column. A war veteran, he witnessed the emergence of a different kind of weapon, operated by a different breed of soldier—specialists engaged in mechanized warfare defined by rapid movement.

Unlike weapons that allow their users long periods of rest after deployment, the tank is a demanding master, requiring ceaseless dedication from its operators. According to Malaparte, “the German soldiers go to work on the engines with pliers, screwdrivers, spanners, and hammers [...] Dressed in black, their big berets tilted over their ears (each beret has a steel badge in the form of a death's head), the German crews

move around their tanks, bend down to examine the tracks, tap the wheels with heavy hammers like railway men checking the brakes of a carriage; from time to time, a man climbs onto a tank, raises the hatch, and pops in and out of the giant's belly” (Malaparte, 2000).

Aviram Barkai, an Israeli historian, explains that the lives of armored corps crews in his country “continued to be a blend of oil, grease, and tedious labor from dawn to the point of exhaustion.” For tank crews, the routine was a maintenance ordeal; they spent their time on the tanks “day and night, slaves to millions of metal screws and bolts, demanding their regular tightening, greasing, oiling, and painting” (Barkai, 2024).

Tiger crews devoted significant time before and after combat to exhausting maintenance and repair routines. The vehicle, notorious for mechanical flaws, required intensive care to function properly. Armored warfare specialist Cowper describes this in terms similar to the assessments made by Malaparte and Barkai: “Crews would spend considerable time cleaning and inspecting the vehicle, checking for signs of leaks, scrutinizing the tracks for signs of damage, assessing whether the road wheels were adequately lubricated, checking that items had been safely stowed, adjusting camouflage, and cleaning the gun barrel. Though these tasks were tedious in the extreme, most crews fully understood their importance” (Cowper, 2016).

4.1 A machine is Hazardous to the Health and Safety of its Crews.

The excellence of the machinery and the training of the German tank crews and commanders facilitated rapid decision-making in combat. German teams operated with alertness and readiness, engaging the enemy while adhering to the principle that they “should hold fire as long as possible, and, if possible, the enemy tanks should not be engaged by a single tank so as to apply maximum firepower” (Cowper, 2016). Versatile in their role, they also served as infantry equipped with MP 40s when necessary.

It is illusory and misleading to assume that tank service- due to the vehicle's protective armor- is less risky than infantry or artillery service. The vehicle is an unhealthy environment in combat, permeated by toxic fumes from the engine and ammunition discharge, as well as the effects of impacts sustained. The interior is claustrophobic, shaken by engine vibration, and deafeningly noisy, with uncomfortable crew stations. Injuries resulting from armored combat are caused by shrapnel, burns, incandescent fragments, or flammable fuel, as well as concussions from projectiles penetrating the armor and causing the metal structure to vibrate and reverberate like a bell. (Cowper, 2016)

In short, crew survival is a collective effort, coordinated through the skills of the commander, driver, loader, and gunner—and, in the case of the Tiger, the radio operator. The crew's sense of belonging sometimes translates into a feeling of ownership over the vehicle, which is regarded as the only woman among them and christened with Germanic names such as “Irma” and “Brunhilde.” (Cowper, 2016)

4.2 Panzers on the Eve of Barbarossa.

At the start of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, the total number of German tanks must be viewed critically; of the approximately 3,505 tanks, 281 were obsolete Panzer I models (Stahel, 2009). A Panzer division- whether Army or Waffen-SS- consisted of two or three armored regiments, totaling between 150 and 202 tanks; however, due to maintenance issues, only 150 were typically in operational condition. Panzer corps were formed from two Panzer divisions each, and a Panzer Group was composed of two to four such corps, plus a motorized infantry division.

In the film, Gassel's five-man crew wears a mix of the black uniforms of SS formations and the green uniforms of the Army- a fusion that was perhaps intentional. In Larry Addington's view, "the Panzer divisions now carried not only the profound expectations of their leaders, but the fate of Germany's greatest military campaign."

According to David Glantz's analysis, Wehrmacht Panzer divisions- supported by artillery and air power—penetrated deep into Soviet defenses, outflanking and encircling them to "disrupt enemy logistics and command and control, and encircle large enemy forces. While follow-on infantry then destroyed the encircled forces, the Panzers could continue to exploit success deep into the enemy rear area" (Glantz, 1999). Panzer divisions advanced rapidly, leaving the infantry behind to cover vast distances on foot, as vehicles frequently broke down on the abysmal Soviet roads (Creveld, 1977).

5. Operation Barbarossa

Following successful lightning campaigns and plundering across Europe between 1938 and 1941, the Third Reich failed to invade Great Britain. Deeming the island nation effectively out of the fight, Hitler decided to conquer the USSR, even while the German-Soviet pact remained in force (Glantz, 2001). In his memoirs, he claimed to see no practical utility in conquering England, believing its overseas empire would instead be partitioned among the United States, the USSR, and Japan (Bormann, 1953).

Operation Barbarossa was planned in 1940 as a crusade against "Jewish Bolshevism" and a vital quest to secure Lebensraum in the prodigiously fertile lands of the East (Rutherford, 2012). Gripped by delusional hubris, Hitler envisioned these territories colonized by other Aryans, such as the Dutch, Croats, and Scandinavians (Bormann, 1953).

By 1943, following the Battle of Stalingrad, the outlook for the Third Reich was grim; its industrial cities were being devastated by Allied bombing raids, and the Wehrmacht was on the defensive on all fronts. The U-boat offensive was faltering in the face of new anti-submarine weaponry, while convoys shuttled between the Americas and Europe, transporting the massive volume of troops and materiel required for the 1944 invasion. Yet that was not all. As Fritz noted, "the resource discrepancy between the warring sides continued to grow; the defection of its alliance partners left Germany isolated; and both troop and civilian morale had plummeted." (Fritz, 2011)

The poor motorization of German military transport- which

lacked standardization- relied on French vehicles captured in 1940. Between 1942 and 1943, German tank production increased by 25 percent; however, despite Minister Speer's efforts, the process was hampered by competing models vying for adoption (Speer, 1970).

Meanwhile, the Soviet adversary was manufacturing approximately 1,300 T-34/76 tanks per month, even though the Nazi leadership- steeped in magical thinking and National Socialist ideology- disdained Slavic industry, dismissing such figures as mere fantasy and Bolshevik propaganda. In a 1943 conference, Guderian confirmed to Hitler the immense number of tanks being built in the USSR. The Führer, in a response that remains controversial to this day, remarked: "If I had known that the figures for Russian tank strength which you gave in your book were in fact the true ones, I would not- I believe- ever have started this war" (Guderian, 1965).

In his book *War Without Garlands*, Robert Kershaw confirms that the Ostkrieg (Eastern War) deeply scarred the psyche of German society, noting that "the number of soldiers involved was immense. Of 19–20 million German soldiers called up, around 17–19 million fought in the USSR" (Kershaw, 2020). We recall Levinas's assertion that modern war, by destroying the other's exteriority, annihilates the identity of the soldiers waging it (Levinas, 1971).

After a war of extermination marked by countless atrocities, it is hardly surprising that the Wehrmacht resisted the Soviet advance with such tenacity. German soldiers were chilled by the realization that the Soviet retribution against their compatriots would be merciless. As Landseer said to his wife, if they do half of what we did there here, you will never smile or sing again. When the USSR invaded Germany, enraged Soviet soldiers viewed the entire German population- from children to the elderly- as "fascist" enemies (Fritz, 2011).

5.1 With each victory, the end of the war seemed to recede further into the distance.

In 1941, despite the incredible successes achieved during the initial months of Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi high command grew uneasy. Their troops were advancing unstoppably yet failing to secure the kind of decisive victory seen in earlier campaigns. The secret to Blitzkrieg lay in rapid campaigns followed by periods of recovery and planning for the German armed forces. European distances were short, resulting in minimal wear and tear on men and matériel. Generally, adversaries were either weak or, after bloody combat, defeated and forced to surrender.

The Soviets, by contrast, demonstrated an unshakeable fighting spirit, mobilizing reserves and engaging in relentless resistance that wore down Nazi manpower and equipment. General Gotthard Henrici described the tenacious Soviet soldier as a superior fighter to the Frenchman—"extremely tough" (Fensch, 2015).

Curzio Malaparte visited a Soviet position captured by the Germans where an entire Red Army battalion had been annihilated, from the commander down to the humblest private. When attempting to break out of encirclements, the Russians "attacked across a carpet of their own dead. They

came forward in long lines and persisted in making frontal charges against machine-gun fire until only a few were left standing... It was as if they no longer cared about being killed" (Malaparte, 2000).

5.2 Barbarossa: You cannot capture the Russian bear

Taking advantage of the cover provided by the German-Soviet pact, Hitler massed armies along the USSR border under various pretexts, exploiting Stalin's disbelief. Despite receiving a vast amount of intelligence, Stalin remained paralyzed, driving Soviet commanders to despair in the days leading up to June 22. Stalin dismissed the increasingly precise, urgent, and alarming information he received as "provocations." On November 18, 1940, the famous spy Sorge informed the Soviet leader of German preparations for war against the USSR (Murphy, 2005).

On June 17, 1941, Stalin received a report signed by Pavel M. Fitin, chief of NKGB Foreign Intelligence, predicting an imminent attack on the USSR within the coming days. Stalin labeled the source- a German officer from the intelligence office of Marshal Hermann Göring's Air Ministry—not an informant but a *dezinformator* (disinformation agent); yet, five days later, the German attack claimed the lives of millions of Soviet citizens (Murphy, 2005).

The operation was expected to destroy Soviet armies, communications, aviation, and supply depots within days, precipitating a rapid collapse of the Stalinist regime (Glantz, 1999). While a skeptical Stalin, confident in his own views, failed to defend the USSR, German intelligence and the Wehrmacht also failed spectacularly in their assessment of the Soviet army and conditions in the East. Misled by the Red Army's poor performance in the war against Finland and the disruptive impact of Stalin's purges on the officer corps, they underestimated the USSR's power, its capacity to mobilize reserves, the country's remarkable industrial progress, and—above all- the tenacity of the Russian soldier.

The Nazi leadership counted on a quick victory by December 1941; however, after the initial months of the offensive, the Nazi high command realized that Soviet resistance was draining the offensive power of their armored forces- forces that were spread across the vast steppes, weakened in their shock impact, and attempting to achieve all of Hitler's objectives simultaneously. In a notable 2011 study, David Glantz analyzes in detail the relative distances involved- contrasting European and Soviet standards- and highlights the immense territorial scale of the fronts, which wore down German tanks, infantry, and logistics (Glantz, 2011).

Plans for a victorious Operation Barbarossa envisioned conquering the USSR from the Polish border to the Urals, at which point the Wehrmacht would reach the famous A-A line (Arkhangelsk–Astrakhan).

5.3 Ostkrieg: War of Extermination

The war in the East was brutal, ideological, and racial, driven by repressive orders issued from the Führer's Headquarters. One such order, signed on May 13, 1941, by Field Marshal

Keitel (as Chief of the OKW), mandated the brutal treatment of Soviet civilians suspected of hostile acts or offenses against German soldiers, while completely exempting Reich troops from punishment or prosecution for actions taken in this ideologically motivated war.

A second order, issued on July 23, 1941, mandated the use of absolute terror should standard punitive measures prove insufficient to achieve the objective. According to Hartmann, this was a "war of annihilation or 'total war,' directed against an enemy nation of perceived inferior racial stock with a competing and hostile ideology. The totality of the coming war was reflected in Hitler's instruction in early March 1941 that Barbarossa was to be 'more than a mere clash of arms; it is also a conflict between two ideologies. In view of the extent of the space involved, the strike down of the enemy armed forces will not be enough to bring about an end to the war.' "(Hartmann, 2019)

Colonel-General Erich Hoepner, commander of Panzer Group 4, summarized his orders: "The objective of this battle must be the destruction of present-day Russia, and it must therefore be conducted with unprecedented severity. Every military action must be guided in planning and execution by an iron will to exterminate the enemy mercilessly and totally. In particular, no adherents of the present Russian-Bolshevik system are to be spared." (Stahel, 2009)

5.4 The scale of the theater of operations: the Tiger traveling to Hades

Across the vastness of the USSR in August 1941, while tank crews watched their machines wear down, dispirited infantry marched on foot, supported by horse-drawn transport and precarious motorized transport. According to the testimony of veteran Siegfried Knappe: "Nothing could have prepared us for the mental depression brought on by this realization of the utter physical vastness of Russia. Tiny little doubts began to creep into our minds. Was it even possible that such vast emptiness could be conquered by foot soldiers?" (Knappe, 1992).

6. Cinema and Interlocution

A film is composed of elemental images that, stemming from the director's cinematic sensibility, give substance to the work. Their origins lie in readings and influences drawn from art and other films. These meaningful, memory-laden particles- derived from other narratives, memories, and cinematic dialogues- are appropriated as elements that sustain the narrative.

This process of adaptation- or juxtaposition- recalls the early Christian practice of removing columns from pagan temples and incorporating them into their basilicas. Thus, according to Marie Martin, a director's moment of ecstasy- or the "contested homage" arising from a psychic dynamic of repetition (and difference)- is perceived by the director, the audience, and fellow filmmakers alike; the recreation, much like those pagan columns, integrates into the new narrative, taking on a full and novel meaning. (Martin, 2021)

When highlighting the narrative's structural markers, we initially encounter the mystery surrounding the *Tiger*'s crew as they traverse the vast time and space of the *Ostkrieg* on an impossible mission. This author recalls a black-and-white television movie- a Western from the early 1960s- in which a gunslinger goes to a saloon every midnight to face a rival in a duel, only to die.

6.1 The Dead: The Last to Know

In the film *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (Tom Stoppard, 1991)- an ingenious adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*-we know both men are doomed, yet they remain unaware of their fate, ignorant of the fact that Prince Hamlet has ordered their execution. Throughout the film, they encounter endless clues suggesting they have already perished. They face incongruous realities, such as a coin that, when tossed dozens of times, always lands on heads.

They fail to realize that their journey's ultimate goal is death- their inevitable destiny- much like the Tiger crew carrying out the orders of Operation Labyrinth. Like *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, the German crew- immersed in an atmosphere of the absurd- believe themselves to be alive, even though death is their inevitable and inescapable fate. Their inability to take concrete action in response to a reality that appears predetermined and déjà vu-like suggests that it is space, not time, that is in motion. (Kazemi & Hanif, 2017)

6.2 Memory in Cinema

Philip's narrative invokes memory through personal flashbacks; however, as Burgin noted, memory is personal and subjective. Conscious desires run alongside unconscious ones, shaping the narrative of memory- which, "of course, betrays it"- and there are elements within memory that seem so private they must remain concealed. (Burgin, 2004) There is a mystery surrounding the relationship between Phillip and the colonel, as well as the images of Phillip's wife and son. Is the colonel his father-in-law, or the father of his son?

Memory in cinema involves the gathering of images and suggestions from other films- a process that, according to Lefebvre, plays an important role in spectating (watching a film). For example, in order to construct a narrative form and comprehend the characters' actions, the spectator must be able to recall faces, places, and situations from one segment of a film to another. (...) But one must be careful not to reduce memory as a whole to this model. (...) (Lefebvre, 1999)

Information stored in human memory can be translated into a semiotic system and becomes increasingly complex, at times involving forgetting and at others producing memories or filling in gaps. In ancient philosophy, memory was linked to imagination, and the two were internally connected. (Lefebvre, 1999)

7. Germany and the culture of fearless debate: from the Ostkrieg to Holocaust memory

In Germany, memories of the Holocaust and the Ostkrieg (War in the USSR) are matters of public discourse, widely disseminated throughout society. These momentous events

exert a significant influence on both popular and high-brow culture, as the authors of this volume document. Historian Christian Meier considers the crimes committed by the Third Reich to be deeply embedded in the foundations of the Federal Republic, which is viewed as the heir to the state responsible for those atrocities (Meier, 1990). And since responsibility is an integral part of freedom, remembering these crimes is a fundamental aspect of the German national process.

Germans have produced films about their participation in the war; some are rife with clichés, while others—more recent ones—reflect a desire to reveal and debate the country's controversial role in these tragic events. One such film, a Dutch co-production titled *Rosenstrasse* (2003) by Margarethe von Trotta, shows how ordinary Germans—non-Jews married to Jewish women—protected their wives throughout the war.

The second is the controversial yet magnificently crafted *Der Untergang* (2004) by Oliver Hirschbiegel, which depicts Hitler's final days in his bunker amidst a ghostly, apocalyptic Berlin. Countless narratives dramatizing the war are presented on public television in the form of documentaries, miniseries, and docudramas about the Holocaust and the Nazi era—such as the superb series *Babylon Berlin*. Programs like those produced by Guido Knopp for German public television (ZDF) tackle controversial and uncomfortable topics.

According to some opinion polls, the German public possesses a high level of historical knowledge, shaped by political values and a specific worldview. On the other hand, scholars insist on the need to strengthen the teaching of recent history, arguing that there are "not enough history lessons in school." (Goebel, 2017)

Numerous academic studies investigate the memory of the war in Germany- including, among others, the lecture series held in 2005 at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. These trends have incorporated new data made available since the end of the Cold War through the opening of Eastern European archives, thereby reviving the traumas of local populations.

7.1 Individual and Collective Culpability

Germany strives to reconcile with its turbulent 20th-century history. It addresses post-war constraints alongside Eastern Europe as a part of the construction of a renewed European continent, while currently hosting a large Jewish community within the Federal Republic. Where the Nazi legacy demanded legal and financial redress, the country has repaired damages and paid compensation to slave and forced laborers. It has apologized to victims and revoked honors previously awarded to retired Nazi officers.

The preface to Hartmann's work on the depredations committed by the Third Reich in the USSR analyzes the ambiguities and difficulties inherent in narrow revisionist scholarship. The people who lived through that era performed complex tasks within that context: "They risked a great deal, whereas we need only hold an opinion on the matter. What

they pursued with a clear conscience causes headaches and remorse for later generations.” (Hartmann, 2010)

7.2 Fighting in the Ostkrieg

The invasion of the USSR gave rise to countless atrocities committed by the invaders and occupiers against soldiers and civilians within the Soviet Union. In an interview given on June 19, 2024, Jeff Rutherford—an American PhD and specialist in the Ostkrieg- referred to the conflict, marked by its immense scale and fanaticism, as a case of "sheer criminality"; he noted that "Nazi Germany's war against the Soviet Union has few rivals in the history of armed conflict," characterizing it as a Vernichtungskrieg (war of annihilation) on the Eastern Front.

This conflict involved the German army acting in capacities that went far beyond its standard combat functions; it "proved a reliable instrument far beyond its combat roles, participating in the Hitler dictatorship's policies of forced labor and starvation of Soviet POWs and civilians, and in the campaigns targeting for death Jews, Communist Party officials and commissars, and partisans."

Awareness of these terrible and infamous actions- justified by Nazi ideology- weighs heavily on the German conscience. In her 2021 article, Esther Meir notes that June 22 is observed in Russia as the "Day of Remembrance and Sorrow," albeit overshadowed by Victory Day on May 9. On this day, the country pauses for a minute of silence, recalling how, more than eighty years ago, the people were informed that the Wehrmacht had crossed the borders of the Soviet Union and that Kyiv and Minsk were under bombardment (Meir, 2021).

According to Christian Hartmann, the war in the East involved the entire Wehrmacht, as well as special units engaged in combat against partisans and the civilian population that supported them. In his view, "none of the 17 million German soldiers who served in it escaped its impact." (Hartmann, 2010) Faced with the vastness of the USSR's territory and population, the people responded to the German invasion with guerrilla warfare that ravaged the occupied lands; this provoked brutal Nazi repression that systematically targeted the defenseless- prisoners, civilians, women, and children.

Even apart from guerrilla activity, at the height of the winter of 1941, villagers were driven from their homes to freeze to death while German troops occupied the heated houses. The "instability" of the occupation made terror the Wehrmacht's fundamental policy- an army "obsessed with the fatal loss of time, rear-area ambushes, the collapse of the home front, betrayal by collaborators, the vulnerability of troops and supply lines, etc." Everyone, from commanders to rank-and-file soldiers, clearly understood that only the constant use of terror would allow them to survive in the East.

Some revisionist authors have upheld the myth that the Wehrmacht was innocent of the ideological war; however, the stark reality of the source material prevailed. In an order to his subordinates, Major General Willibald Freiherr von Langermann und Erlencamp explained that the German soldier had to be "significantly harsher in the fight against the

Judeo-Bolshevik threat," leading regular troops to realize that their repressive duties were identical to those of the *Einsatzkommandos* (even though the latter killed far more people).

In late September, security divisions- such as Einsatzgruppe B- demanded that the army take over the fight against guerrillas as a matter of security policy, arguing that the strength and weaponry of the guerrilla groups turned policing into a primarily military task. This form of warfare also contributed significantly to the brutalization of the Ostkrieg. (Hartmann, 2010)

The high command and upper echelons of the German armed forces were driven by a racist desire to wage this apocalyptic and merciless ideological conflict (Rummel, 1992). According to some sources, it claimed the lives of approximately twenty-seven million Soviet citizens (Lopez et al., 2019). However, the figures remain fluid; according to Bershidsky, the total death toll stands at 42 million (Bershidsky, 2024). It is hardly surprising that the blowback struck the Third Reich as a brutal act of vengeance- wreaked by another genocidal and democidal regime, the Soviet Union- upon German military prisoners and civilian populations.

8. On the Bridge: The Tiger and the Doe

Returning to the opening scene on the bridge, where the Tiger tank is conducting a rearguard action. It uses its armor and powerful weaponry to keep the Soviets at bay while German troops complete their withdrawal to the opposite bank. Did Philipp wish to die at that moment and delay the retreat? Having fought the war to defend his family, did he suddenly- finding himself without them- desire death? Weller begs them to leave the bridge immediately.

Philipp hesitates, reading a scrap of paper and gazing at a photograph of his wife and son. The loader insists; there are only four and a half minutes left before the bridge is blown up.

Rousing himself from his stupor, Philipp orders the driver to start the engine. The bridge seems too long to traverse in such a short time, especially amidst the fire and debris. As they are leaving the bridge, Weller shouts a warning: Ilyushin—the name of the Soviet attack aircraft that struck terror into German tank crews. The bridge is bombed, and flames engulf the tank, pouring in through the hatch. During this chaotic crossing, Philipp locks eyes with an innocent, peaceful doe that is staring intently back at him.

In the film Freud's Last Session (2023), Matt Brown presents the image of the doe as a symbol of innocence and human frailty in the face of fate. Suddenly, in the trenches of the Western Front, amidst the deaths of soldiers, a doe appears—fragile, with a gentle gaze. It is an unprotected soul surrounded by barbed wire, explosives, and bayonets. The doe is associated with the passage to the beyond- acting as a guide for the heroic lover to the other world- and with disappearance; these traditions are rooted in classical, Celtic, and Germanic lore (Ogle, 1916). The doe is almost universally associated with fertility, rebirth, and immortality.

In Greece and among the Maya, the deer was linked to eroticism, rebirth, and rejuvenation (Wermess, 2006).

8.1 The Bridge: The Journey along the Paths of Hades

For the German philosopher Heidegger, the bridge is the greatest symbolic link between earth and sky, between divinities and mortals (Heidegger, 1971). The bridge in the film, connects the hell of the Ostkrieg to the salvation represented by the territories occupied by the Reich. The bridge does not unite mortals with divinities; rather, it links antagonistic mortals. The gods look on at the conflict from high atop Olympus, while life and history traverse the bridge. Next time, the Tiger will not cross a river by traveling over the bridge, but rather beneath the waters.

However, the German soldiers fighting in the USSR are not gods; they are mere mortals. For Heidegger, when mortals contemplate the nature of death, it does not mean- by any means- making an absolute void their ultimate goal. Nor does it mean obscuring life by being blindly drawn toward the end. They find themselves engaged in what resembles the final mission of their lives as combatants. Could the doe be the gateway to the infinite life of memories that each person carries within? (Heidegger, 1971)

Phillip is riding in a truck toward the dilapidated facility where the Tiger tank is being repaired. In his mind, he replays the escape from the bridge and the Ilyushin's arrival. He then takes a bottle of Pervitin from his pocket and removes a few pills. He asks the driver if they will be arriving soon, but the soldier- curiously- does not answer. It is as if he were dead, as if he could not hear him, or as if Phillip were inaudible. He turns his attention to a red folder resting on his lap- stamped "Top Secret"- containing the new mission entrusted to him by his superiors: Operation Labyrinth. He is to rescue a high-ranking officer from enemy territory- Colonel Paul von Hardenburgh- who holds secrets vital to the defense of the Third Reich.

Phillip murmurs the officer's first name, Paul, and the image of a lit lightbulb flashes into his mind- bright as the light in Picasso's *Guernica*, an image of madness. In the film Freud's Last Session, the semi-fictional character C.S. Lewis glimpses a lit streetlamp similar to the one Phillip saw.

Upon stepping out of the vehicle, he heads to the spot where the crew is repairing the Tiger tank. When the men ask about the new orders, he replies: their leave has been canceled, and they have been assigned to the secret Operation Labyrinth— a mission to return to Soviet-held territory and retrieve Colonel Paul Hardenburgh.

Helmut expresses surprise at the objective. What is the reason for bringing back an officer who died in the Battle of Stalingrad? The others speculate that if he survived, perhaps he defected to the Soviets. Weiller argues that the operation is impossible for a single Tiger tank to carry out.

Phillip retorts curtly that other Germans had failed to rescue the colonel before them. High Command believes they will succeed this time, and he emphasizes that orders are not to be debated but obeyed.

8.2 The Russian Night holds Memories of War and Death

Refueled and repaired, the Tiger leaves its base, traveling through a sunlit forest landscape devoid of human life. During the journey, the men show curiosity about Colonel Hardenburgh. He had been part of the German 6th Army, commanded by Von Paulus, which was encircled and annihilated by the Soviets at Stalingrad in February 1943. It was known that he had miraculously survived, hiding for five days amidst the ruins of a factory.

With his hand trapped in the rubble, he had survived without food or water, in freezing cold, surrounded by the enemy. Surviving such adversity and remaining alive after the German surrender arouses suspicion: "If he survived, he must be a spy," says Keilig, the radio operator. German authorities have made no attempt to contact Hindenburg since the bridge explosion. Through a series of flashbacks, a murky episode from Stalingrad emerges, pitting Philip against the colonel. The conflict stems from Philip's deeply ingrained belief in carrying out orders at all costs—whatever they might be— whereas Hardenburgh rejects this inhumane notion.

As the Tiger tank moves near the front lines, the wreckage of battle appears—scattered objects and destroyed vehicles. On the deserted road, a group of German soldiers is putting up signs indicating directions and distances. We, the viewers-like the characters- notice that one of the soldiers, a *Gefreiter*, appears to be wounded or dead, and the signs themselves bear confusing information. Yet, adhering to cinematic conventions of realism, we accept the scene as it is, and the film moves on. Assessing the signs, Mueller jokingly remarks that they will confuse the Soviets during the German retreat, and asks if "Adolph, the Austrian," actually believes in retreats.

That night, while bivouacked in hostile territory, they light a fire- violating safety protocols that dictate they should sleep without light, hot food, or cigarettes. They drink a whitish liquid to pass the time, only to be drawn by a muffled sound. Knowing the woods are teeming with straggling Soviet soldiers and fierce partisans, they become extra vigilant. Michel tells his comrades about a Russian peasant woman he befriended who warned him that the souls of the dead- like them- wander the forest. Suddenly, he asks, "Why didn't we burn on the bridge?" This is the first mention of fire- an element intensely present in the film- pointing memory in two directions: one toward pain and punishment, the other toward purification and subsequent redemption.

Gaston Bachelard observes that fire and heat offer the opportunity for imperishable memories—simple yet decisive personal experiences. For the Swiss thinker, fire emerges as a privileged phenomenon. If everything that changes slowly is associated with life, everything that changes rapidly is connected to fire (Bachelard, 1987). Philip reaffirms his friendship with the colonel- they were academy classmates, and Hindenburg is the godfather of Philip's son. He and Michael walk around the bivouac, spotting on the horizon the pale flames of will-o'-the-wisps flickering with a bluish hue in the dark night. Michel complains to the lieutenant that Helmut, the driver, hates him and persecutes him. Philip

explains that the driver had a fifteen-year-old son- an anti-aircraft gunner- who was killed during an Allied raid. Struck directly by a bomb, the boy was vaporized, leaving his father, Helmut, to bury an empty coffin. "He picks on you because you matter to him," Philip says. As Michel walks away, the officer gazes thoughtfully at the bluish, ghostly flames of the will-o'-the-wisps, until a ghostly voice calls his name.

8.3 The War in the East: A Vast Graveyard of dead Populations and hiding Mines

As they move through a landscape devoid of living beings, Keilig, the radio operator, picks up an unusual broadcast on his headset. Radio and television broadcasts in cinema introduce the ambiguity of a medium that conveys an interwoven narrative. In the film *Section 317* (1965) by Pierre Schoendoerffer, the journey of a small French military unit during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954) is mirrored by faint radio transmissions. These echo through the film without an apparent causal connection, serving merely as a ghostly link to the outside world via sound waves.

Keilig picks up a Roman Catholic Mass being recited in Latin. When his comrades ask why he finds listening to a Catholic Mass so odd, he retorts that they are in a region where the population is Orthodox, making the broadcast of such a ceremony nonsensical. Meanwhile, signs of battle appear along the roadside, along with a belt of concrete "dragon's teeth" obstacles that force the Tiger tank onto a side track. Wallig stares at his watch; the hands seem frozen. He taps the glass with his fingers, but they do not move.

Michel asks Philip who built the concrete barrier; the answer is that Russian prisoners did. The strong survived, he says, but the weak- exhausted by the labor- lie buried in trenches where the earth mingles with human bones.

Passing a downed plane by the roadside, they traverse an open field, dangerously exposed; Philip spots a sign lying in the grass warning that they are entering a minefield. He halts the Tiger and orders young Michel to dismount with him. While Keilig keeps watch on the horizon, Philip and Michel position themselves in front of the Tiger, searching for mines lying in the vehicle's path. As they dig and cautiously extract one, young Michel nimbly grabs a hand grenade wedged between two devices, preventing them from exploding. Philip tells Michel to stay calm; the trembling youth obeys, climbs onto the tank, and orders Helmut to reverse along the existing tracks.

When the driver questions Michel's absence, Philip replies curtly: "The Tiger is the priority. Heading back along the same line, Helmut spots Michel lying on the ground, holding the mines in place. He marvels at the courage of the young man, whom he affectionately calls "kid," despite having previously stopped him from taping a photo of his girlfriend onto the tank.

Philip skillfully handles a disarming cable, granting Michel the honor of detonating the device from a safe distance. After the blast, Philip and the crew embrace the Tiger's youngest member—except for Helmut, who declares he won't hug the kid. Knowing the driver lost his own son and harbors affection

for him, Michel takes the initiative. He gives the driver a filial embrace; moved, the driver gives the young man permission to hang up his girlfriend's photo.

8.4 The Ambush

At one point in the journey, Philip observes the trees lining the road as they filter the sunlight. Flashes of memory bring back happy images from the past: him beside his wife, dressed in simple clothes. Clean-shaven, relaxed, and with his hair neatly cut, he is seen hugging his son and laughing in the warm summer sun- a happiness that will never return, suddenly interrupted by the image of a lit streetlamp.

Suddenly, a shell explodes in a tree, and Philip begins evasive maneuvers to avoid being caught in enemy fire. Another projectile detonates just ahead, signaling imminent danger. He maneuvers cunningly, positioning the tank among the trees and moving out of the line of fire. He spots Soviet armored vehicles hidden in the foliage- among them, a massive, advancing SU-100. Although Weiller suggests engaging the enemy, Phillip refuses the fight, arguing that a battle would delay the mission.

Resuming their route, they come to a halt before a river. Phillip surprises the crew by deciding to cross it submerged, as there is no bridge. Weiller warns of the risks involved in the operation, noting that their training for it had been cut short. The Tiger is sealed, and a snorkel is attached. Nervous, they enter the water and remain submerged, much like submariners. Images of the film *Das Boot*- in which a German submarine and its crew scour the seas only to perish in the end- come to the minds of some of the analysts.

In a brief moment of regret, Keilig belatedly agrees with Weiller's point of view- they should have fought- to which Phillip retorts that they would have been easy targets. Hearing the sounds of transport vehicles moving on the opposite bank, he orders the noisy engine shut down- a decision that infuriates Helmut, who argues it is too risky; if the engine fails to restart, they will all drown. "We are safe while submerged,"

Phillip counters, even as the crew sweats in the stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere, nearly overcome by the pernicious effects of the thinning air.

A new flashback transports Phillip to the past, showing happy images of his wife and son together in a sunlit forest. To Hayward, this flashback betrays a desire to relive the past; it conveys Phillip's memories and history in rapid-fire d ...a symbol here and another there. Philip's flashbacks are both introspective and retrospective. He speaks of a mystery, of an unresolved love triangle involving Hardenburg, Philip, Marion, and the son, for whom the colonel is godfather, or could he be the father? It is through these flashbacks that we become aware of this mystery (Hayward, 2006).

Then, returning to reality inside the Tiger, he notices his watch is still stopped at 12 or 24 hours. He asks Weiller for the time; Weiller replies that it is 12 o'clock, explaining that his own watch has not worked since the incident at the bridge. Michel recounts a story told by his friend- a Russian peasant woman named Bodhana- about a spirit dwelling in the river

that drags unwary swimmers to the depths. The peasant woman offers subtle resistance to the invader; without using weapons, she instills in him a fear of what the Russian land harbors and represents.

8.5 Flames that kill and condemn

While Philip is lost in reminiscence- recalling the colonel, bearded and happy- the crew interrupts him, complaining of leaks that threaten to sink the *Tiger* to the riverbed. Finally, trusting his instincts, he orders the departure. Hellmut cranks the engine twice; it fires up on the third attempt. Hearing the roar of a true tiger, everyone rejoices- as Hellmut puts it- at having escaped death in an iron coffin. They emerge from the water into the darkness of night; after Philip opens the hatch, they breathe in the fresh forest air, even as he notes they have fuel for only 20 kilometers- a negligible distance across the vastness of the steppe.

Then, new memories surface: bathed in warm sunlight, his entire family is gathered together with Colonel Hardenburgh. The colonel is not old enough to be Philip's father, but- one wonders- could he be his father-in-law? He pulls the bottle of Pervitin from his pocket, taking a few pills of the methamphetamine- the Third Reich's magic drug- and orders the crew to consume them as a collective military gesture: "I want you all to stay awake," he declares. Could this serve as a metaphor for Nazi ideology- a narcotic drug that must be consumed regularly to keep everyone tethered to it? Does the user become numbed, traversing a hyper-excited reality, remaining awake without ever truly sleeping? Keilig refuses, stating: "I prefer to think clearly." (Ohler, 2017)

The Tiger approaches a clearing illuminated by flames, halting before a crowd. The crew makes out the fire amidst the trees, the clamor, shouts, orders, the chaos, and the leaping flames. Bachelard explains that a fire implies an arsonist almost as inevitably as an arsonist starts a fire. Fire burns in the soul more surely than it does beneath the ashes. The arsonist is the most secretive of criminals. (Bachelard, 1992)

The flames rise from a Soviet village set ablaze by an *Einsatzgruppe*. The scene of repression is filled with barking dogs and brutal soldiers who—using rifle butts, shoves, and verbal abuse- herd panic-stricken civilians together. Leaping from the Tiger, Philip and his men enter the fray, making their way toward Lieutenant Colonel Krebs, the operation's commander. He is no secretive arsonist; he is brazen, making fire his tactic of choice. Sporting a facial scar and using a harsh, gravelly command voice, he orders his men to drive cows and horses into the barn alongside the village population- women, children, and the elderly.

Philip introduces himself to the lieutenant colonel as a member of the 503rd Heavy Tank Division and requests a few jerrycans of fuel to continue his special mission. Krebs mocks the tank crew—privileged men who don't get their hands dirty with the kind of repressive activities he carries out. Given the commotion in the village, Philip is surprised to find German troops so deep behind Soviet lines. Krebs retorts, "It's our special mission. To clear out the villages that supported the partisans."

When Philip asks if the population will be sent to labor camps, Krebs replies, "The days of labor camps are over. That's why we put the animals inside the barn; when we set it all ablaze, the maddened beasts will trample those people and save us the ammunition. The Reich has developed such an appetite for death that there's never enough ammo." Around them, jets of flame from the flamethrowers consume the barn, the people, and the animals, creating a deafening cacophony that shocks the crew and Philip. Krebs, illuminated by the fiery glow and looking demonic, asks with a tone of accusatory complicity: "You remember the flames, don't you?"

9. A pause amidst warlike Romans, Austrian wines, and vineyards

After securing the fuel, they sit inside the tank, eating and drinking something Weiller jokingly calls "nectar of the gods." Kieling retorts that it's swill: "Even I, a Latin teacher, know it's no good." Weiller then murmurs the name of an excellent wine: "Baron von Clausen, '37." It is a Smaragd- the best wine he ever produced- and he describes it mockingly: "delicately fruity, carefully balanced acidity, and with soft notes of apricot. Reich Marshal Hermann Göring enjoyed it so much that he bought half the entire production." Disconsolate, he raises his mug: "Nothing left for me but to drink this piss." When the others ask how he became a winemaker, he explains that he is an Austrian from the Wachau, where winemaking runs in his blood. Yet the winery isn't his; it belongs to a baron. Weller retorts, "If you make it, the wine is yours. Does the landowner own the sun, the wind, and the rain—are those all his, too?"

Weller smiles; for a Latin teacher, he holds rather communist ideas. Keiller- perhaps echoing the age-old rift born of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, the *Varusschlacht*- replies: "If the Romans left us any contribution to knowledge, it was war. Subjugating other people and their own people. So the landowner, the machine operator, the winemaker, and the teacher could all fight and obey orders, forgetting those they loved. No way out- yes, sir; no, sir."

Phillip of the turret brought the discussion- which was veering into politically dangerous territory- to a close: "We obey orders to protect those we love; without orders, everything else falls apart." Helmut, the driver, replies with typical Taurean stubbornness: "No talk of politics in my tank." Philip leaves the tank and walks into the night alongside Weller, who murmurs, "I wish I could forget. Forget who we were. It will never be the same again. How can things go on after all this?" Phillip answers: "Forgetting what we are won't make us different. We'll still be the same. We obeyed orders and did what was asked of us."

9.1 Battling the Su-100 and its dead

The tank continues its advance across the desolate daytime landscape, approaching an abandoned, half-destroyed mill. Facing a perfect spot for an ambush, the experienced Philip maintains a cautious distance, suppressing a nagging sense of foreboding. He orders machine-gun fire to unsettle any hidden adversary. However, the unseen Soviet tank in ambush fires, and the shell kicks up earth right in front of the Tiger. The Tiger executes escape patterns and returns fire.

The Su-100 starts its engine, sheds its camouflage, and leaves its cover to confront the Tiger; the Tiger fires, but the shell merely ricochets off the thick armor. The crew recognizes it as the same armored vehicle that had challenged them earlier. It couldn't be the same one—how could it have followed them this far? They maneuver frantically to hit the opponent's flank, but the other vehicle is faster, damaging the Tiger's exhaust; the Tiger responds with an sidestepping action and fires smoke grenades. As the smoke screen envelops the scene, the Tiger maneuvers, narrowly avoiding a shot that would have pulverized it.

Philip lures the enraged Su-100 toward a crater; the monster falls in, exposing its vulnerable armor, and is struck by a precise, devastating shot from the powerful 88mm cannon. To the relieved crew, he explains the difference between a self-propelled gun- where the cannon is fixed to the vehicle's hull- and a tank, which has a more agile, rotating turret. "The problem with those damn things is that they only look at what's right in front of them."

In the brief battle, Keilig, mortally wounded by shrapnel, clasps Philip's hand and asks, gasping for breath, whether the conflict between him and Hardenburgh is personal. The young man asks that a letter be written to his family, and the officer promises to see to it; after the burial, everyone heads to the wreckage of the Su-100.

Standing before the destroyed armored vehicle, Michel is startled to find the crew members reduced to skeletons rather than fresh corpses. Something is clearly wrong—they remark that bodies burned by fire would not decompose so rapidly.

10. The Hardenburg bunker: a labyrinthine underworld

Philip assures them they are close to the Hardenburg bunker, and the driver, Helmut, reports that their fuel supply is sufficient for only 30 kilometers; however, the lieutenant confirms they will refuel upon arrival. Once again, the men question him about his relationship with the colonel, which they find overly personal. Kielsing stirs up dissent, rallying the others to call off the mission and return immediately to German lines. The motion is put to a vote and defeated. With a look of calm, Philip considers the matter closed: "We'll never speak of this again," he says, reassuring the gun loader, Weiller.

On the horizon, the grim flashes of lightning- or perhaps a distant storm or battle- flicker. The compass in Philip's hands spins wildly, unable to find north, yet he manages to trace an old route to the bunker on the map. They advance through a torrential downpour, and the image of the three burning windows in Stalingrad flashes back into his mind.

As they march through the fog, a skeletal tree looms- an obsessive presence suggesting a cold, unreal, and demonic place. Philip halts the Tiger, spotting nearby footprints; he disembarks the crew, who are armed with light weapons. Just as he had sensed danger at the minefield, he anticipates a threat here, spotting a tripwire in the undergrowth connected to German grenades. "The bunker is nearby," he murmurs,

just as they make out- amidst the mist-shrouded trees- the decomposing bodies of dozens of paratroopers, some still caught in the foliage, others sprawled across the ground.

10.1 Hardenburg, the Conscience of the Crime

Wallig questions why the crew was sent on Operation Labyrinth if the large force of paratroopers had failed. Philip argues that the headquarters entrusted the mission to them precisely because the others had failed. At the top of a ravine, they spot the bunker entrance, shrouded in vegetation. They approach cautiously, ready to fend off an ambush.

Moving warily through the labyrinthine tunnels and empty rooms, they hear voices and laughter. They come upon a brightly lit area filled with German soldiers and alluring female auxiliaries from Hardenburg's team, socializing with frenetic high spirits.

A corporal stands out from the relaxed, intoxicated group and greets Philip, informing him that the colonel is waiting at the command post. Standing beside a beautiful female auxiliary, the man raises a glass and toasts to life, drawing a look from Philip that is a mix of surprise and indignation at the lack of military decorum. "Come with me," the corporal says, "but only you." At that moment, a flashback shows Philip at the base with the crew; a soldier hands him a telegram informing him that his wife and children have been killed in an Allied incendiary bombing raid. While he stands frozen, clutching the paper, the radio operator- wearing his headset- announces a new order: "Withdrawal of our forces across the Dnieper and demolition of the bridge at midnight."

This timing is the key to the narrative's crucial temporal framework, locking the Tiger crew into that fateful moment. Philip recalls this as he follows the smiling corporal down the corridors, a whistled tune drifting in from the distance. Standing before the passageways, the lieutenant murmurs, "What a labyrinth." Near the command room, the corporal turns to the lieutenant and says, "Have courage." As Philip moves away, illuminated by the side lamps, the corporal watches him closely, sighing with relief at the completion of an arduous task.

10.2 Underworld, banquets, damnation

The film *Der Tiger* draws parallels with Benicio del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*; the first is the name given to the enigmatic, tortuous, and disorienting place where a colonel, a truth, the revelation of a crime, and eternal damnation lie hidden. The second is Philip's descent into the underworld—the command room—a space that could be either paradise or hell. Inside, there is an immense fireplace with a roaring fire. The third point of connection found in the command room is a long table laden with delicacies, arranged much like the feast of the Pale Man who haunts the underground realm in *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Colonel Hardenburg stands there in his military greatcoat, unshaven and with a piercing gaze- like a Nazi Pan. He turns and fixes his eyes intently on Philip; by way of greeting, both men remove their caps in a movement that resembles the start of a duel rather than a fraternal reunion. "Paul," Philip

murmurs, both men making a gesture as if to embrace, but the lieutenant stops short when he sees the empty sleeve of the other's uniform—missing the right hand, amputated at Stalingrad, that fateful and haunted name.

10.3 The Tiger, the admission of guilt, and the German catharsis since 1941

"So it's true," murmurs Philip, looking at Hardenburg's mangled hand; Hardenburg retorts, "Germany lost so much at Stalingrad- what's a little hand in comparison? Come closer to the fire." Philip mentions that the corporal told him the colonel was expecting someone, and the other replies, "Not just someone- you!" But Philip counters that he has come to take him away. Hardenburg, omniscient as Pan, answers: "Of course; you had to make this journey." And with the firmness of a man accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed, he fires off: "Do you remember that summer I introduced you to Marion?" Images of the happy couple appear in the light-bathed scene. "After that, there was only war."

Philip, remaining calm, insists he has come to take him away. Hardenburg laughs, his tone ironic: "It's strange they sent a tank just to pick everyone up, isn't it?" The colonel confronts the man- who follows orders so blindly that he fails to grasp the absurdity of the situation—about coming in a single, cramped tank to retrieve an entire team from behind enemy lines and return them to the safety of German positions. Philip, humble, retreats into his standard argument: "They must have their reasons." This bovine response provokes a bull-like retort: "And what if I refuse to go?" Hardenburg challenges. Philip replies that he hopes it doesn't come to that. Hardenburg, in an accusatory tone, remarks that they sent the right man for the job, adding mockingly, "Orders are orders, right?" He pulls up a chair with his remaining hand and invites Philip to sit, eat, and drink- ironically calling it a "Last Supper"- to which the other replies that they have no time.

The colonel counters, "No time for an old friend?" He recalls their mutual friendship from happier times: "I'm your son's godfather; you owe your luck to me." Then, in a mix of command and invitation, he tells Philip to sit, eat, and drink. He pours himself some wine, takes a sip, grimaces as if the drink has turned to vinegar, and blurts out: "When you're trapped under the rubble for five days, you slowly start dying of thirst."

Reminiscing about his days trapped in the ruins of Stalingrad, he declares: "You have plenty of time to think, and you see a lot of things in the shadows." Philip absorbs this. "I heard about your rescue in Stalingrad- incredible." Hardenburg leans forward, asking in a sharp, accusatory tone: "What did we do in Stalingrad, Philip?" Faced with that collective "we," the lieutenant grows restless, uncomfortable, and evasive: "I don't have time for your games."

10.4 Stalingrad: The Nemesis of the Characters' Decisions and Lives

The recurring scene of the three windows in a burning building—an image that haunts the entire film- is explained in all its dramatic intensity, alongside the lit bulb hanging from a pole that illuminates the urban battlefield. We are in

Stalingrad; the crew, clad in winter uniforms, crouches beside the tracks—not of a Tiger tank, but of a flamethrower-equipped PzKw III or IV.

We learn that the German advance in the crucial Stalingrad sector—a movement that would determine the battle's outcome- is being blocked by the tractor factory. This solid structure shelters women and children, as well as Soviet soldiers. Division command orders the immediate neutralization of this obstacle, yet Hardenburg, the officer in charge on the ground, hesitates to carry out the order. The troops await the decision while the major, gripped by anguish, wavers, fully aware of the defenseless crowd sheltering inside.

Here, we discuss the "tragic sense of life," a central concept of Miguel de Unamuno. It is the existential anguish arising from the insoluble conflict between reason- which proves mortality and with which Hardenburg is imbued- and the desire for personal immortality (faith/the will to live) embodied by Philip, the soldier who carries out orders. It is a continuous "struggle" between the human desire to endure forever and the awareness that death is inevitable: "Everything vital is irrational, and everything rational is opposed to life, because reason is essentially skeptical" (Unamuno, 2023).

The radio operator insists that the skeptical major must order the attack, as the other commanders are growing restless and confused. While Hardenburg's contorted face reflects the difficulty of the decision, Philip appears calm, cold, persuasive, vital, and- consequently- irrational. The tractor factory controls the city. "It won't be taken unless we act now. Those are the orders; the decision isn't ours." Defying the major, Philip issues orders to his crew and climbs onto the tank, while Hardenburg- finally overcoming his scruples- confirms the order to fire and attack, relaying it to the other troops.

From the tank's turret, Philip fires a jet of liquid flame, setting the three-windowed building ablaze, followed by the deafening screams of women and children. His expression reflects the shock caused by the screaming, while Hardenburg stands up and gazes helplessly at the carnage wrought by the fire. The stunned faces of the crew members are shown one by one- individualized in their guilt- each reflecting the horror they have caused. Their expressions of pain reveal that something deep within them has awakened to the atrocity they have committed.

11. Nemesis: Retribution and Justice

Recalling the words of Levinas: violence consists not so much in wounding and annihilating, but in interrupting the continuity of people's lives- forcing them to play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, compelling them to betray not only their commitments but their very essence, and driving them to commit acts that destroy any possibility of agency (Levinas, 1971).

Back in the bunker, a calm Philip retorts that the blame for the civilian deaths does not lie with them. "There was no choice; we were following orders." But Hardenburg sharply counters: "Yes, we had orders, but we also had responsibilities." His

words draw the lieutenant's gaze to the table, where he observes with astonishment that- much like the corpses in the SU-100- the food is rapidly decomposing. The cheese is moldy, the meat is teeming with worms, and the fruit is rotting. Hardenburg pointedly checks his wristwatch—the fateful timepiece that governs everyone's lives. "It is midnight. You must return across the Dnieper." He then leans in, speaking confidentially. "I am here because of you. We are all here because of you. Can't you see that?"

Philip insists he came to rescue him as part of Operation Labyrinth. Hardenburg stares at him sarcastically: "Labyrinth- that's your doing!" Philip retorts in desperation, "I have to get you out of here. Colonel Richter ordered it!" Hardenburg continues to taunt him: "Who is he? Does he even exist? The clues were there all along." We return to the scene in the truck where Philip opens the folder of orders, but this time, the mission sheet is blank. Captain Hatteras—a character from Jules Verne- was conditioned to always head north; Philip, though he does not yet realize it, is constantly moving toward the moment of his own death (Virilio, 1988).

The clues scattered throughout the film begin to make sense to the still-bewildered Philip. Back in the Tiger, when he asked the time, and Keilig replied "twelve"- whether 12:00 or 24:00- it was the same time shown on Philip's watch and everyone else's all along. The spinning compass; the incongruous skeletons of the Soviet Su-100 crew; Keilig insisting that something is wrong there. Michel asks, "Why didn't we burn on the bridge?" There are the decomposed bodies of paratroopers near the labyrinthine bunker- a den of underground forces- or those from the Su-100, prompting Michel to say in astonishment: "Corpses don't burn that fast."

11.1 To Become Aware and Die

Philip stands up and reminds his friend of Colonel Krebs, the pyromaniac. In the fireplace, the roar of the flames swells, seemingly enveloping them both. Hardenburg smiles as a spectral voice calls out Philip's name- Philip, who is becoming increasingly disturbed and confused. It signals the collective guilt of the German army, the SS, and the repressive police divisions, all of which committed atrocities. No one is free of guilt in the Ostkrieg. "Maybe Colonel Krebs was a part of you-just like the rest of us." He turns around, authoritative: "It's midnight; you need to cross the Dnieper."

The voices of the crew members are heard asking the same thing as Hardenburg: "Why was the order to withdraw from the bridge delayed? It's not like you to put the crew in danger." Pressing the issue, he drives his point home: "The clues were there the whole time. The telegram announced the death of Marion and their son Fritz in a bombing raid." Confronted with the truth, Philip is shaken and trembles. The death of the wife and son he was meant to protect has awakened in him a desire to join them- to die. Philip repeatedly screams, "Fire! Fire!"- his family perished in the flames that eternally consume the poor Soviet women and children of Stalingrad. He turns to Hardenburg: "I fought the war to protect my family," to which the colonel, impassive, retorts: "You reap what you sow."

Philip asks the colonel why he brought him to a place like the bunker. Meanwhile, the flames rise to a crescendo, engulfing the room and the two characters. "We've reached the end of your journey," says Hardenburg; "mine was already over." He explains that he died at the tractor factory; raising his uninjured hand, he murmurs, "Come, old friend," and the scene frames them both as they are consumed by the flames. "It's time."

Trembling, Philip replies that he needs to find his men; without him, they'll be lost. Then, the film flashes back to the opening combat scene on the bridge: the tank begins to withdraw, Ilyushin aircraft attack, and voracious flames pour in through the hatch while the crew screams, desperate to escape. "Paul," Philip asks, "where am I?"

The bridge is blown up, fire swallows the Tiger, and everything collapses thunderously into the river as Philip, eyes wide, watches the photograph of his wife and son burning away. From this point on, fire becomes a purifying process for the Tiger because, by consuming matter, it annihilates its impurities. In other words, that which has undergone the test of fire has gained in homogeneity and, consequently, in purity. (Bachelard, 1992)

12. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gasse's *Der Tiger* (2025) arranges its scenes, characters, and pacing around an eschatological objective, wherein the singularity of each moment of traumatic memory from the past explains a static present- a present whose ultimate revelation is death. The circular time structure adopted begins the narrative with the scene that will ultimately serve as the finale. The characters move through the world disconnected from life, their actions suspended in a limbo between a traumatic past and a senseless present. Unlike typical tank movies- visual spectacles designed for entertainment- *Der Tiger* embodies the atonement for the crimes of an ideological war of extermination that still haunts the country.

The film is set against the backdrop of the rapidly accelerating, irreversible collapse of Hitler's "invincible" legions in the face of "Asian hordes." At a strategic bridge over the Dnieper River- during the German retreat to the opposite bank- a Tiger tank confronts the spearhead of the Soviet steamroller, holding the line until the German troops can withdraw to the European side and the bridge is blown up at midnight.

The protagonist, Lieutenant Philip- a man who executes orders from his superiors at any cost- is given a special mission: to locate Colonel Hardenburg behind Soviet lines and bring him back to the German side. A series of incongruous clues emerges throughout the journey, and although the crew encounters strange and disturbing events, no one fully grasps the reality of their own existence.

The war on the Eastern Front- the Ostkrieg- resulted, according to some statistics, in the deaths of 42 million people in the USSR, alongside material destruction on an unprecedented scale. The catharsis of this war of extermination is present in the film through a sequence

revealing that both Hardenburg and Philip had participated in the emblematic Battle of Stalingrad. German troops waited before the vital tractor factory- an obstacle to their final victory and a shelter for a multitude of women and children. Hardenburg hesitated to give the order to destroy it and advance. Philip, a dutiful soldier, overrode him and ordered fire to be opened on the factory, acting on higher commands. The resulting blaze drew a desperate cry from the women and children trapped in the flames.

This scene would haunt the entire film as an indelible stain- an inescapable mark of the war of extermination waged by Nazi ideology and the racism rampant within the Army high command and broad sectors of the troops. Philip and his crew eventually encountered Hardenburg. Yet, deep within the subterranean world of the bunker, they were confronted with the truth: they were dead. They had to accept their fate and to set things right- return to the Dnieper bridge, where they had perished, consumed by that same destructive fire which had transformed into an agent of purification and regeneration.

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