

Listening to the Enemy: Challenging The National Narrative of World War II in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction

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Abstract: This article analyses five Norwegian novels that all incorporate German soldiers' experiences as an important part of the Norwegian story of World War II. Abandoning the strong focus on antagonistic relationships of previous narratives, the five novels analysed in this article represent a new approach to the history of the war that aims to view the enemy through what Bull and Hansen (2016) have called agonistic memory, which includes the perspective of the perpetrator to understand conflicts.

Previously, when Norwegian authors included German soldiers in narratives about World War II, it was part of a general portrait of the enemy. The individual soldier has few distinct features and no independent identity. These portraits followed the hegemonic Norwegian narrative of the occupation: The good Norwegians, who were part of the home front, versus the Germans and the morally inferior Norwegians who supported them. However, in the last ten years, several novels have revisited the war narrative through representations of previously neglected groups, one of which is the German soldier. The five novels have quite different approaches, but they all question the traditional Norwegian war narrative through complex representations of the enemy. My analysis of the five texts will identify how the texts challenge the conventional history of the occupation through an agonistic perspective that aims to revisit how the war is remembered. These representations of the German soldiers are a central part of the new examination of the long shadows cast by the memories of war in Norway.

The German soldier has generally been seen as a symbol of evil in Norwegian fiction about WWII. For the most part, the soldiers have served as a generic background for the heroic feats of the Norwegian Homefront

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or as famous and notorious sadistic perpetrators. These portraits are quite similar to what Petra Rau (2013) and Joanne Pettitt (2017) have described in their analyses of British and German representations of Holocaust perpetrators, where Nazis either function as the heroes' evil and unfathomable counterparts in an antagonistic relationship or as perverse screens for our deviant desires. However, the representation of German soldiers in Norwegian fiction has changed within the last ten years, which can be seen in light of a general contestation of the previous hegemonic iteration of Norwegian post-war history. This discussion reaches beyond literature with an aim to tell a different story that includes transnational and transcultural memories of both German soldiers and victims of the Holocaust. In this article, I will focus on the representation of German soldiers, as their inclusion in Norwegian history and fiction instantiates a new version of Norwegian history and attempts to form a contemporary story of WWII that includes the perpetrators, and examines and, to some extent, challenges the line between victim, bystander, and perpetrator.

The Norwegian master narrative about WWII still tells a story of a five-year-long struggle between heroes and aggressors (Stugu 2020). In this narrative, the heroes in the Norwegian Homefront and ordinary citizens bravely fought against the ruthless German occupiers and the traitorous Norwegian members of *Nasjonal Samling*, who are viewed as German accomplices. As Anne Eriksen (1995) and Ola Stugu (2020) have shown, this story has played, and still plays, a central role in the definition of Norwegian collective identity by providing a shared sense of courage and moral purpose.¹ This master narrative of the war has, until recently, left out contradicting perspectives and focused on the fundamentally antagonistic relationship between the occupiers and the occupied, while, for instance, leaving out the story of Norwegian Jews (Michelet 2014, Corell 2021).

The occupation of Norway during WWII is still a cultural trauma that has played a central role in defining Norwegian identity. Jeffrey Alexander has defined cultural trauma as an event that "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (2014, 1). To change or redefine cultural

1 For some time, Norwegian historians have told different versions of WWII in Norway for some time, but, as Ola Stugu (2020) argues, the traditional narrative is still central in most public discussions about an artistic representation of the war.

memories, Alexander highlights how “carrier groups” aim to tell a new story that challenges the current master narrative.² By representing previously silenced groups, this new story destabilises the heroic narrative in search of another and more complex expression of the occupation that opens onto a more problematic and even traumatic past yet to be reconciled. Instead of focusing on a central dichotomy between good and evil, placed at the heart of the Norwegian master narrative, the new narrative reformulates the cultural traumatic events by reinterpreting the identities and positions of the agents involved in the story.

Two key changes have led to this development. First, there has been a global rise since the start of the new millennium that positions the Holocaust as the main event of the war. This change has influenced the Norwegian discourse to move in new directions (Storeide 2019). Secondly, there has been a growing focus on the perpetrator as a key element in telling a more complex and thorough story of the war (Canet 2019). Several Norwegian authors have begun to contest the old master narrative through representations of previously excluded groups, such as the German soldiers who occupied Norway and members of *Nasjonal Samling* and their descendants (Langås 2022, Torjusen 2021). In the novels I examine in this article, some of the authors even attempt to position the German soldiers within a grey zone that stretches from naivety to actual perpetration. In this sense, the portraits of the Nazi soldiers are complex and aim to raise feelings of empathy and understanding.

My analysis will focus on five novels, all published after 2012. The novels have different agendas and aims, and they carry different messages and focus on other areas of remembrance and silence. However, they all centre on a new representation of German soldiers and on telling a new story of WWII in Norway that differs from previous versions. I begin with Einar O. Risa’s novel *Maskineriet. Listene. En besettelse* (2012, *The Machinery. The Lists. An Obsession*). Risa’s novel aims to describe the Norwegian participation in the deportation of the Norwegian Jews. Next, Ingrid Storholmen’s

2 According to Alexander, there are four central elements to a new narrative. First, the nature of the event. Second, what group of individuals were affected by these events. Third, how this group is related to the wider audience. And finally, who is to blame for these events. In the five novels I analyse, the authors aim to refocus the events by including the Holocaust and not only the occupation. They recast the group by including Norwegian Jews and, to some extent, German soldiers. In this sense, they blur the line between the perpetrators, bystanders, and victims by establishing new connections and identities.

novel *Her lå Tirpitz* (2014, *Tirpitz was here*) examines German soldiers' memories onboard the German warship Tirpitz to show the soldiers as complex individuals. Kristi Ericsson's novel *Den hjelpsomme okkupasenten* (2017, *The Helpful Occupier*) focuses on the interplay between Norwegian citizens and German soldiers through a retelling of the life of a German officer suffering from war-related trauma in a small Norwegian coastal town. In Arne Næss' novel *Blindgjengere* (2019, *Unexploded Bombs/Walking Blind*), the central gambit is a relationship between a Norwegian woman and a German soldier that allows Næss to tell stories of Germans as victims. And finally, in Kristian Klausen's novel *Den lille mannen fra Argentina* (2022, *The Little Man from Argentina*), the author employs counterfactual historical elements to examine our preconception of the nature of the perpetrator by relocating Adolf Eichmann to a small Norwegian city in 1960.

The scope of this article is to analyse representations of German soldiers in these novels and to examine how these touch upon central questions that challenge the previous narrative by asking new and vital questions: How is it possible to give an enemy a voice? How can we portray the inner life and conflicts of a perpetrator? And how do these narratives challenge the previous conception of Norwegian history? In different ways, these texts explore new expressions of memory through representations of events and characters that have not previously been examined. In this sense, these texts aim to confront previous ideas about German soldiers and explore new ideas and memory configurations. In short, is it possible to draw a complex and nuanced portrait without justifying the enemy's version of history or silencing the victims' voices? The five novels give different weights and answers to these issues. Still, central to all of the novels is the importance they assign to the German experience of the war and how this experience differs from and challenges Norwegian experiences. The novels, then, use these perspectives to show new and alternative versions of the war that enable new configurations of history and memory.

The Myth of Modern Norway

Anne Eriksen has called the memory of the Norwegian occupation and especially the heroic efforts of the Homefront during World War II a "creation myth of modern Norway"³ (163), and Ole Christian Grimnes has

3 Author's translation.

called it the foundation of a “national consensus syndrome” (Grimnes 1990). The consensus suppressed and repressed memories that went against the heroic and patriotic interpretation, which meant leaving out the deportation of the Jewish population in Norway and the economic and political cooperation with Germany (Storeide 460).

However, in recent years the Norwegian master narrative has increasingly been challenged. According to Annette H. Storeide, the change occurred at the turn of the century as Holocaust increasingly became an important topic of public debate in Norway (2019). These debates were part of a global development, where the Holocaust has come to stand as the “ultimate” crime against humanity on a global scale (Levy and Schneider 2006, Craps and Rothberg 2011). In a Norwegian context, the inclusion of the Holocaust, and especially the discussion of Norwegian participation in the deportation of Jews, has brought local and national history into conflict with global and transnational history on a least two levels. First, Norwegian history needs to be seen in context with the global history of the war, where Norwegian heroism means less than in a national framework. Secondly, if we consider Norwegians as implied subjects, to use Michael Rothberg’s terminology (2019), this would entail a more complex and complicated retelling of the national narrative, which would necessitate new avenues of memory and the inclusion of previously suppressed and repressed voices and viewpoints to make sense of the new narrative.

These discussions have become even more prevalent in recent years, which recent examples amply show: the extensive discussion of Marte Michelet’s book *Hva visste hjemmefronten* (2018) about the Homefront’s knowledge of the deportation of the Norwegian Jews; the debate about the Norwegian Authors’ union’s “Æresrett”; and, lately, the discussion about the tv-series *Frontkjemperne* (2021) broadcast on national television (NRK) that retold the memories of Norwegian volunteers in the German army who fought on the Eastern front. These discussions have been concerned with new histories of WWII that are no longer based on purely antagonistic memories within a strictly Norwegian context. Instead, they try, in much the same way the five novels I analyse in this article, to include previously excluded voices and question the hegemonic Norwegian hero narrative. They attempt to expand the story of WWII to include the complexity of war, the ethical and ideological worldviews of previously excluded groups, and the ethical hegemony of the Holocaust.

As mentioned, one of these groups is German soldiers in Norway. Previously, German soldiers were seen as members of an occupying force that committed countless atrocities against the Norwegian population, but they were mainly used in the capacity of an existential threat against the Norwegian nation. However, these new histories open new ideas about categorisation and responsibility, and a key theme in all five novels is precisely how to categorise the German soldiers. For one, they were occupiers, but not necessarily perpetrators; they were, at least in part, responsible for the Holocaust, yet, they might not have participated in it or even known about the events. Finally, they were victims. First, victims of the German war machine, and secondly, victims of a destroyed Germany after the war. In this sense, they inhabit different categories that transcend or oscillate between the traditional categories of perpetrator, bystander, and victim. Yet, even as perpetrators, as they appear in some of the novels, they play an essential role in highlighting the complexities of Norwegian history. For instance, the unstable categories of the German soldiers highlight the unstable positions of Norwegians within a framework that includes both local and global history, where the Norwegians, at the same time, were victims of German aggression, participants in an economic system controlled by Germany, and participants, implied subjects, or bystanders in the deportation of Norwegian Jews.

To achieve a new perspective, the novels employ global or transnational remembrance by directly or indirectly including German memories. Several of the novels include a bibliography that includes German autobiographies, biographies, and books on German history. In this way, German historiography and debates intermingle with Norwegian discourses through what Astrid Erll has called “travelling memories” (2011, 11). Memories are dynamic, multilinear, and often have fuzzy trajectories of remembrance and forgetting, which Erll highlights that we need to be aware of in our approach to transcultural memories (14). In this sense, the memory and meaning of the Norwegian occupation are being challenged by including German memories that have their own prehistory. National borders cannot restrict memories, and their multidimensional movements, in time and space, eventually challenge any attempt at creating a stable narrative.

This challenging of the national consensus or master narrative is not based on antagonistic memories of the war, which see events and history in light of good and evil – nor is it seen through what has been defined as

cosmopolitan memory, which sees events in light of abstract categories and universalised contexts. Instead, I will argue that we ought to analyse the novels in light of the memory configuration that Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen have called agonistic memory (2016), which focuses on the intermingling of historical contexts and socio-political struggles. Borrowing Chantal Mouffe's critique of cosmopolitanism, Bull and Hansen outline a reflexive and dialogic concept of remembering that accepts conflict and human passions as a central part of remembrance. Works written within the horizon of agonistic memory attempt to include multiple perspectives to have an open dialogue between different, often antagonistic, groups. The objective is not to entertain a relativistic, constructivist approach to history and memory but rather an attempt to include, if not all, then more and differing perspectives that were previously excluded. Of interest to this study is that the perpetrator's perspective becomes valuable in understanding historical events. Instead of passing judgment or merely bearing witness, the aim is to examine and create a dialogue and thereby establish a community to "bring to light the socio-political struggles of the past and reconstruct the historical context in ways which restore the importance of civic and political passions and address issues of individual and collective agency" (2015, 401). In this way, Bull and Hansen's concept is a guiding principle for understanding the approach to memory and history in the five novels and their attempt to invite the German soldier into a conversation about WWII in Norway that is no longer based on an antagonistic vision of good versus evil.

The German as an Enigma: Einar O. Risas

***Maskineriet. Listene. En besettelse* (2012)**

In Einar O. Risa's novel, the German perpetrator is replaced by a complex and unsettling image of perpetration that implicates Norwegians in a way that has yet to be tackled in public. To achieve this aim, two central perspectives intermingle in Risa's story. First, the perspective of the Norwegian machinery responsible for the deportation of the Norwegian Jews onboard the ship DS Donau that left Oslo on 26 November 1942. Secondly, the perspective of the principal architects behind the deportation, where we find Heinrich Himmler at the centre of the cabal. To highlight these two perspectives, we also follow Norwegian Nazis, the police officers responsible for the deportation,

and members of the bureaucracy. The meeting point for the two perspectives is the story of the Holocaust – told through the connections between the Norwegian and German iterations and the spread of antisemitic ideologies in Norway.⁴

Risa draws a portrait of the machinery through official documents, such as lists, newspaper articles from years during the war, legal documents, and public regulations. These documents are presented and commented on by the narrator, often in an ironic and resigned way, for instance when the narrator comments on the law legalising the Norwegian deportation implemented the day after the event: “It has become legal. Without regard for the provisions of the constitution” (88). Risa’s presentation of the machinery shows how central a thoughtless bureaucracy was to the events. Yet, at the same time, it shows the willful neglect among the people responsible for the deportation. It might have been a machine, but it needed Norwegian operators to function. As Risa highlights in an op-ed published alongside the novel: “Responsibility. Responsibility? It was an order, an assignment, but it was secret” (22).⁵ The machinery needed preparation and attendance; it needed control and planning.

In this respect, the novel aims to show how much information was known about the Jewish population and their destiny during the war: It was never a secret. It was organised in careful detail and with the active participation of Norwegian police and bureaucracy – and later, when the property of the deported Jews was to be reclaimed, with the active participation of the populace. In this sense, the lists function as an angry indictment of historians and society for their neglect in telling and their role in suppressing this story. As the narrator indignantly comments as an introduction to the bibliography: “Sources do exist” (138). According to the narrator, they have so far been neglected; not only during the war, when newspapers willfully chose not to print news about the deportation, but also in our current conversations about the war. In this sense, the book is an indictment of repression and silence.

4 A precursor to Risa’s treatment in a Norwegian context was Kolbjørn Brekstad’s novel *En navlestreng af stål* (1995, *A Umbilical Cord of Steel*) about a German doctor who fled to South America after the war. However, Brekstad’s novel does not concern itself with Norwegian history and therefore fall outside the scope of this article.

5 All translations are made by the author of this article.

The second centre of the novel is Heinrich Himmler, who functions as a contrast to the machinery. However, the portrait of Himmler is also drawn from documents, such as letters, memorandums, and photographs. The novel begins with a brief description of Himmler in March 1942, based on a photo from Himmler's private archive. It is important to note that the photographic evidence is used to stress how the narrator's portrait of Himmler is based on equal measures of speculation and documentation, i.e., the description that begins the story: "He sits there, bent over his papers, he is working, he needs to go somewhere, he is underway, maybe on a train" (5).

On the one hand, the photographs document the meetings and travels that will eventually lead to the Norwegian (and global) deportation of the Jews, and they allow Risa to discuss actual historical events. They also establish an artificiality in our understanding of Himmler through the narrator's emphasis on distance and the speculative nature of his descriptions. Yet, the narrator eventually enters Himmler's mind, at least momentarily, but the reproduction of his mind is held in the same tone as the previously mentioned documents:

RF-SS Himmler is pleased, he has arrived in this fertile country, he has met the Volksdeutsche farmers who are going to build the new colonies. He has no abdominal pain, Felix Kersten, his own Buddha, is not with him on this journey. RF-SS Himmler has studied cotton plants. (104-5)

The combination of the title (RF-SS), free indirect speech, and a style devoid of subjectivity creates an eerie tone that marks Himmler's mind as an enigma. Even though we are presented with photographs of documents displaying his thoughts and ideas and are told about his family, friends, and social circle, he is still impenetrable.

In the central chapter in the representation of Himmler, called "Time within him," Himmler suffers from abdominal pain. Following the symptoms, the chapter focuses on his relationship with his masseuse Felix Kersten, who treats him. The narrator notes how Himmler is suffering from exhaustion from everything he needs to do and wants to control and how Kersten alleviates his pain. The description insinuates a homoerotic relationship but also portrays the perpetrator as a conscientious servant who sacrifices his health for what he believes to be a just cause – even while the traumatic events impregnate themselves as a somatic response.

In this way, the portrait of Himmler also envisions the perpetrator and mastermind of the Holocaust as a screen for other people's imagination. The Norwegians responsible for implementing Himmler's directives mainly see him through newspaper articles and photographs, which Risa later uses. There is no direct contact between Himmler and the Norwegian events. Instead, the connection establishes how a flood of papers with real-world consequences drives the Norwegian machinery responsible for the deportation. In this way, Risa avoids the traditional portrait of the German soldier or Nazi as a primitive and perverse ideologue devoid of a personality. Instead, Risa focuses on a wide array of Norwegian citizens happily following the orders sent by a foreign and distant group of people only known through documents and photographs.

In this way, Risa wants to broaden Norwegian history by including the Holocaust as something that occurred in Norway as part of global events and, at the same time, establish Norwegian responsibility and show direct Norwegian ties to a global antisemitic movement. Within such a framework, the occupation of Norway should not be seen in a heroic light, but rather as an event that fostered a cultural trauma that still exists as an undercurrent influencing ideas about Norwegian identity. In Risa's portrait of the war, there was a significant ethical breakdown during the deportation, which has yet to be dealt with in contemporary history. The memories of the deportation and the active participation may have been repressed through the use of screen memories, such as the images of Heinrich Himmler as the nefarious mastermind. However, Risa's novel aims to confront these fictions to include previously silenced victims and repressed perpetrators in the Norwegian story of the war.

The Soldiers' Chorus:

Ingrid Storholmen's *Her lå Tirpitz* (2014)

In Ingrid Storholmen's novel *Her lå Tirpitz*, there is not one but a large group of German soldiers telling their stories.⁶ Just as in her previous book, *Tsjernobyľfortellingene* (2009, *Tales from Chernobyl*), which narrated the story of the disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, Storholmen recounts the events by letting multiple characters narrate different parts of the event

6 See Torjusen (2022) for a more detailed analysis of the novel.

and show different perspectives and interpretations. In total, 68 individual first-person narrators take turns telling their stories in *Her lå Tirpitz*. They are not all German; also Norwegians in contact with the crew and the seamen's families are represented.

Storholmen's text is important because her novel is one of the first attempts to give a voice to ordinary German soldiers in a Norwegian context. Furthermore, the aim is not to represent the soldiers as perpetrators but as individuals. In an interview, Storholmen stated that she aimed to "undress the crew of their strongest protection against identification, the uniform, to discover the man inside" (Wangen and Bratlie 2014). To further this aim, she provides the soldiers with detailed prehistories; they have different opinions about the war, women, and religion; they have violent altercations internally; and some are convinced ideologues, while others just follow along. In this way, Storholmen attempts to include a wide range of viewpoints and identities instead of using the traditional generic German soldier without personality or history.

At the heart of Storholmen's novel is the history of the German warship *Tirpitz*, which anchored up in Norwegian fjords during WWII.⁷ The first brief section describes the construction of *Tirpitz* and the preparation of the ship and crew for the journey north. The main section of the novel narrates the crew's everyday life on board *Tirpitz* at anchor in Norway. The pivotal scene of the book – and the story of *Tirpitz* – is when the ship in 1944 is bombed by British aeroplanes and sinks, killing 970 German soldiers. The novel's closing section tells the story of the surviving crew and family members from the end of the war up until 1995. This section blends the traumatic aftereffects of the catastrophe and the post-war repercussions in Germany. Here we find stories of Russian soldiers raping women, economic depression, and the prolonged effects of trauma suffered during the war – both individually and within the family.

Still, the focus is on the individual soldiers, and to show their distinctiveness, Storholmen tells their stories – and the story of *Tirpitz* – through brief monologues ranging from two lines to two pages, each monologue marked with the speaker's first name in the margin. Some characters are part of the entire story, while others only briefly participate. The story evolves through individual retellings of the events in the form

7 See Bockwoldt (2020) for a thorough discussion of different representations of *Tirpitz*'s history.

of essayistic reflection, passages from diaries, letters, and more lyrical passages. This allows us access to their emotions, dreams, and desires – as well as their memories and thoughts about politics, war, morality, and religion. These monologues are supplemented by two-page chorus-like passages, where the soldiers on board the ship talk about their fears, frustrations, or hopes for the future. The two-page spreads are formed from sentences one or two lines long. These sentences do not have any name attached to them. Furthermore, they contradict each other, support each other, or try to provide comfort. In short, they give us an idea about the general atmosphere on board Tirpitz.

The deaths of the 970 soldiers are the central event in the story and the soldiers' lives. For one, it structures the novel. The story builds up to the event, and when it arrives, it is highlighted by graphical elements, such as a gradually slanted font that mimics the ship going down. Furthermore, it structures the soldiers' lives and the lives of their relatives and descendants, who live on with the trauma of the shipwreck. In this way, the reader comes to see the German soldiers as victims. They die individual deaths, the survivors suffer, and their families suffer. By investing them with individual stories and moral systems, Storholmen can also show individual reactions to life on board the ship, to the news of the Holocaust that eventually reaches the ship, and to the aftermath of the war.

Another central part is the narrative frame for the story, which is set by a character named Ingrid, who functions as the biographical author's double. As an important framing device, Ingrid plays a central role in our perception and understanding of the German soldiers as victims of the war. From the story's beginning, the narrator is emotionally influenced by the sailors' deaths. In the prologue and the epilogue, Ingrid retells how she heard about the death of the sailors when she was a child and eventually developed a strong interest in the story. Later in life, when she was researching the novel, she met with survivors and descendants – and in the epilogue, she visits one of the places Tirpitz lay at anchor near her childhood home. Here she meets the ghost of a 19-year-old sailor, who died in the bombing, and who deplores her to tell his story:

I stare at him. He doesn't talk, but I feel that there is something he wants to tell me. He comes even closer, I can see the green tinge in his eyes, the hair that seems wet. Now his face is so near that I could

have touched it, but I'm unable to move. "Ich bin nur 19 Jahre alt," he says. "Ich will nach Hause." Slowly the face disappears completely. I'm only 19 years old, I want to go home. (237)

The ghost's wish for sympathy and empathy closes the novel and thereby completes the novel's circular structure as this experience becomes the driving force for Ingrid's desire to tell the story and for her attempt to envision a different portrait of the terrified young men who suffered during the war. In this sense, the narrator's vicarious trauma becomes the starting point for the novel.

However, a significant omission from the actual history of Tirpitz is the more dramatic events the ship was involved in. The ship saw several battles, but they are, except for the description of the sinking of Tirpitz, only described through the crew's subsequent reflections and impressions, if they are even mentioned. The soldiers are, in this sense, almost erased as active participants in the war. Instead, they are victims of the Nazi regime and the aftermath of the war. Furthermore, Storholmen's representation of the German soldier deviates from previous generic approaches in that she gives them individuality through their personal histories. However, the representations of the individual consciousnesses are shown in isolation, as they are never in direct contact with other people. We learn about the soldiers' thoughts and dreams, but they are never brought into conversations or exchanges with other people – except in the anonymous, chorus-like sections. This means that the soldiers become static, almost symbolic examples of different personalities and their reactions to the war.

The challenge for Storholmen is to liberate the young soldiers of their uniforms and show them as individuals in the hope that the reader will relate to them with empathy. This, however, means leaving out important events in Tirpitz's history, where the ship functioned as the aggressor; waylaying the question of the Holocaust; and largely dismissing the issues of the crew's adherence to Nazi ideology.⁸ In this way, the portrait of the young men leaves out central issues of the war to enable a different representation. Storholmen does succeed in broadening the perspectives of the war in Norway by including transnational and transcultural

8 Tirpitz was one of the flagships of the German navy, and the crew was, with all probability, chosen among elite forces. See Sæveraas (2021) for a discussion of the ideological beliefs of the German soldiers in Norway.

memories and experiences with an agonistic perspective. By including the memories of the perpetrators and even questioning the stigmatisation of the perpetrators, Storholmen manages to expand the memory landscape of WWII in Norway.

Love and Desire: Kjersti Ericsson's *Den hjelpsomme okkupanten* (2017) and Arne Næss' *Blindgjengere*

Compared to the experimental approach of the three other novels in this article, both Kjersti Ericsson and Arne Næss use a more traditional realism in their approach to writing about the events of WWII. Both novels deal with events during and shortly after the occupation, and they are both told through a third-person heterogenous narrator limited to one or two points of view. Notably, both novels have a German soldier as one of the main characters and focaliser. In Ericsson's novel, we follow the German officer Dieter Welser and his troubles in the fictitious coastal town Kreklingvåg at the end of the war. He has been wounded and traumatised in battle and is now sent to a remote outpost to recover without having confronted the reasons for his trauma. Næss' novel tells the story of a young and innocent soldier, Sepp Bräuer, who falls in love with a young Norwegian girl. He comes into conflict with the German army, and she is forced to move to Germany and experiences the consequences of the defeat.

Kjersti Ericsson's novel continues her interest in the memories and effects of WWII. She has previously written about the plight of children in the aftermath of the war (2005), and alongside *Den hjelpsomme okkupanten*, she has written about the wartime experience of women (2017b). A central concern running through her different interests has been the outsider's perspective and how it intersects with justice. In *Den hjelpsomme okkupanten*, this outsider perspective comes into play in several ways – first of all, in the choice of a German soldier as the main character.

An outsider in Norway, Dieter Welser is also an outsider in the German army. He has been wounded in battle and convalescent for a long time when sent to Norway. The trauma he suffered in battle has challenged his views of himself as a husband, father, and soldier, and especially his relationship with his teenage son has become problematic. His new position as a commanding officer in charge of building fortifications in a small, backwater Norwegian fishing village strengthens this identity crisis. He attempts to help and befriend the Norwegians but is

rejected and even vilified, and his fellow German officers are defeatists, incompetent, or corrupt.

A central focal point of the novel is the fortification project. At first, Welser is determined to succeed, but the task becomes more and more absurd as Welser hunts for materials and Russian slave labour. In his mind, the slave labour and their living conditions are just a technical problem, as is the sexual morality among the soldiers, which he solves by importing a band of prostitutes from the Eastern front. Even amidst all the resistance, he sees himself as an emissary from a more civilised world promoting enlightenment and friendship to a group of unwilling and backward natives that do not brush their teeth, even if he provides them with free toothbrushes.

Another central frame for the story is the representation of Welser as a man living an unexamined life. He is not inherently evil, but caught up in a destructive ideology, living without authenticity and reflection. However, the second focal point of the novel is Welser's transformation. It begins with his fascination with the son of a Norwegian couple whose house has been occupied by the German army. He is the same age as his son, who rejected him at home. Here, he can demand respect, but the boy still refuses his approach. At first, he wants to befriend the boy, but eventually, he becomes infatuated with him – and the relationship climaxes with a rape that the novel omits. We can only surmise what happens, but the event changes their relationship.

In this sense, a perversion that is not understood even by himself begins to alter Welser's personality and starts to confront his suppression, denial, and thoughtless adherence to the Nazi ideology. His faith in Nazi Germany begins to waiver late in the story – at first, it only leads to more perversion and stronger desires. However, when the Norwegian boy dies toward the end of the novel as a part of the resistance, Welser begins to reflect upon his actions and his place in the world. In this way, Ericsson's novel is a complicated depiction of the German soldier as a human being caught in the middle of historical events too large to grasp. Ideology, emotions, desires, and history interweave and cast the perpetrator as an outsider that unsuccessfully tries to make sense of his own life and the world around him, especially when he encounters a Norwegian society that is described not as filled with heroic individuals but rather as a conflictual wilderness full of contradictory interests.

Arne Næss uses the portrait of the German soldier to show a different type of relationship between Germans and Norwegians. The title

of his novel, *Blindgjengere* (2019), has two different meanings. First, it is military slang for a dud or an unexploded bomb; however, it can also be understood as people who walk through life without reflection – just as Dieter Welser in Ericsson’s novel. In Næss’ text, the first section focuses on the love story between the soldier Sepp and the Norwegian farmer’s daughter Marit. The young Sepp is caught between different interests – the German army, his upbringing, and his relationship with Marit’s family and the local population. At first, he is “loyal to the state” (115), but his relationship confronts his blind ideology. Just as in Ericsson’s novel, the conflicts between different responsibilities, desires, and emotions expand our understanding of the ordinary German soldier’s complex subjectivities by, on the one hand, highlighting the main character’s adherence to Nazi ideology and, on the other, the complex inner negotiations and conflicts that seem to be impossible to resolve.

A second centre in Næss’ novel is Marit’s experiences in Germany at the end of the war. Her story gives the reader an image of German suffering and the internal conflicts in German society at the end of the war. Marit’s perspective allows Næss to have an outsider’s perspective of the events, which is not marred by ideology and national victimhood.⁹ In this sense, Sepp and Marit’s relationship allows Næss to show us the effect, limits, and consequences of Nazi ideology on the individual, the family, and the nation. It also allows him to challenge the boundaries of the Norwegian hero narrative by telling a more complex story of the perpetrators and enemies – and their complicated relationships with Norwegians.

Contrafactual guilt. Kristian Klausen’s *Den lille mannen fra Argentina* (2022)

At the start of Kristian Klausen’s novel, Adolf Eichmann arrives in Drammen, a small Norwegian city of 50.000, in 1960. He has left Argentina and his family behind in fear of Israeli agents and wants to start a new life in Norway. Living in secrecy, he learns Norwegian, gets a job at a paper factory, and eventually begins a relationship with the author Martha Dreyer, who lives next door.

9 The story displays some of the same themes as Stig Dagerman’s famous travel essay *Tysk höst* (1947, *German Harvest*), where he reported on suffering and trauma in post-war Germany.

This counterfactual gambit places one of the most notorious war criminals as a tragic little man within the larger framework of Klausen's literary experiments. This volume is part of a trilogy of counterfactual novels. The first novel, *Døden i arbeid* (2020, *Death at Work*), had the painters Agnes Martin and Mark Rothko as main characters, and the second, *Anne F.* (2021), had Anne Frank and her dad as protagonists. In these novels, the main characters are also relocated to Drammen; they live near Eichmann's new home, walk along the same roads, shop in the same stores, and meet some of the same people – and even each other – in Drammen.

Furthermore, the three novels build upon Klausen's previous novels and stories that experimented with autobiographical material but in a very self-conscious and fictitious manner. These novels are set in the same locations as the trilogy; they meet the same people; and buy the same products. In a previous novel, the semi-autobiographical narrator writes diaries that eventually are turned into the novel we are reading. The same notebooks and the same bookshop counterfactually reappear in the later novel about Anne Frank, where she uses them to write her diary. In this way, these repetitions occur structurally and in the most minute details.

In this sense, the counterfactual representation of Eichmann in Klausen's novel is woven into an overarching mythology that comprises Klausen's own life and the geography of Drammen. This fictitious doubling allows Klausen to reframe and destabilise the stories of Rothko, Anne Frank and Adolf Eichmann by deploying counterfactual histories and aligning them with a destabilising layer that frames the stories as constructs that do not insist on any historical accuracy. Instead, the novels focus on how stories are interconnected and how the past and the present are interchangeable and reframe each other when retold in new stories. This allows Klausen to experiment with questions of trauma and guilt in the three novels that highlight historical lacunae, especially considering the minds of enigmatic and problematic real-world persons.

In all three novels, Klausen builds from the main characters' real-world biographies, allowing them to maintain their individual characteristics. However, these are slowly challenged and distorted in their confrontation with the population and geography of Drammen. In *Den lille mannen fra Argentina*, the starting point is the description of Eichmann in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). At the beginning of Klausen's novel, Eichmann is the perpetrator who does not acknowledge his guilt, as he

repeatedly states throughout the story. However, from the very beginning, we sense a different undercurrent, as when Eichmann thinks about his secluded life in Argentina: “He had thought: This is a place I can hide. Here I might even find ... dare I say the word ... peace?” (29). The portrait of Eichmann focuses on if and how he has been traumatised by his acts during the war. This type of perpetrator trauma, however, is a controversial topic. As Saira Mohamed has argued, the problems associated with representing this type of trauma are tied to the moral status awarded to victims and the question of bearing witness to trauma (268-9). Against these ideas, Mohamed argues that trauma should not be confined to victims and should not be awarded any type of moral status (270). Instead, we should view perpetrator trauma as an entry to understanding the perpetrator, which does not “entail identification or forgiveness” (271).

As Erin McGlothlin has shown, many types of empathy and identification are at play in representations of perpetrators – many of which are not tied to forgiveness (2021). Instead, these forms of identification can allow more nuanced ethical discussions. In McGlothlin’s typology, the most problematic identification between reader and character is ideological identification, which allows the perpetrator’s ideology to influence the reader and justify their actions. In Klausen’s novel, the ideological component is problematised by Eichmann’s negative descriptions of his acts and beliefs and how he has been traumatised, shown by how his thoughts involuntarily keep circling atrocities he caused. Furthermore, Eichmann no longer views himself as part of human society due to his actions. In this sense, the counterfactual setting allows Klausen to go one or two steps further than Arendt in that he can question Eichmann’s words during the trial by inserting Eichmann into a new and unknown location that challenges his ideology and identity.

The first step is to remove his family and friends and isolate him in a small town in a foreign country. Here he is forced to establish new routines, find a job, and learn a new language – and he is confronted more clearly with the aftermath of German crimes in Europe than in Argentina. His solitude also prompts him to think back to the events during the war. As previously mentioned, these flashbacks arrive involuntarily and repeatedly, showing his traumatised mind at work.

At first, he attempts to keep a distance from other people, but eventually, he develops a relationship with his neighbour, the author Martha. This relationship is described as the first in which he feels love and physical attraction, and their lovemaking becomes almost “something

religious. As if his caresses of Martha's standing naked body were a type of worship" (81). The emotional relationship with Martha slowly influences his thinking. It has a positive effect in that the relationship frees his emotions in different areas, such as music and arts. Yet, it also makes the traumatic episodes appear more often and forces him to defend his actions more vigorously in his mind.¹⁰

In the end, Martha realises who he is. She finds an envelope with payment for a letter from Hitler addressed to Eichmann that he sent to a dealer to finance his stay in Drammen. As a response, she leaves him on May 17th, the Norwegian National day, even though she, at 51, has become pregnant with their child. After she has told him about the child and left him, he can no longer keep his guilt at bay. The mental and emotional development, which has slowly changed him from the monster in Arendt's book to a more complex character, who has come to realise his trauma, now culminates. The physical and emotional relationship with Martha has liberated his physical self and made it impossible to keep the repressed and dissociated memories in check: "Naked. Here I am. With my all" (158).

He is forced to work through the memories instead of merely acting out, which, as Dominick LaCapra has shown, reforms the traumatic past by reshaping it in to a "seamless narrative memory" (2004, 121).¹¹ Yet, the liberation of his memories does not entail a change in his conscience. He is still caught between, on the one hand, his sense of duty and belief in the Nazi ideology and, on the other, his acceptance of his crimes and abandonment of humanity:

All the dead, everything I should be tormented and harrowed by.
I have tried. In the last year, I have opened the fence in front of the
soul, travelled down, and torn my defence and self-justification
asunder. But then I discovered something underneath that is even

¹⁰ The symptoms of perpetrator trauma are much the same as order types of traumata, except for a stronger occurrence of intrusive imagery (MacNair 2002). The symptoms are met with coping mechanisms, such as neutralizations and rationalizations that attempts to rationalize the acts and deny any blame and reject any victims (McGlothlin 2020, 106–7).

¹¹ To LaCapra, there is a difference between working through the past as a victim and as a perpetrator. To master previous transgressions, the perpetrator needs to "distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices" (2001, 79).

worse. That is precisely it. Below my consciousness is something even more accurate, the truth I have attempted to avoid, namely that I do not feel remorse. I do not feel any pity and shame, and guilt. [...] I did my duty and am proud of that. (168)

In the end, he is unable to reject his sense of duty. Still, he decides to leave Drammen and turn himself over to the Israeli embassy in Oslo, hoping that his execution will be able to “execute that in the human being which is – and always will be – able to do what I did” (170). This deep-seated internal conflict in Klausen’s representation of Eichmann, between ideology and guilt, is never resolved. Eichmann continues to be a mystery, even to himself. In this sense, Klausen is not interested in the question of evil but rather in the ensuing trauma of evil deeds, and Klausen’s portrait does not swerve away from evil, as Eaglestone (2011) argues most portraits of perpetrators do, but instead uses his counterfactual construction to reframe the issue.

In this way, the counterfactual story of Eichmann not only highlights the problem of reconstructing biographies and examining trauma and guilt but also influences our understanding of present-day Norway through Klausen’s manipulation of space and time. By conflating persons and events from New York, Amsterdam, Argentina and Drammen, Klausen underlines the problems with dividing history into national, regional, and global perspectives – just as he dissolves temporal differences by merging events from across a span of more than 80 years. The *verfremdungseffekt* at play in the counterfactual narration thus allows us to emphasise with Eichmann in a way that a more straightforward narration would not have made possible; yet, more apparently, it also marks a distance by highlighting the constructed nature of the representation. In this manner, Klausen’s introduction of the Holocaust in Drammen contests the hegemonic Norwegian story – and the arrival of Eichmann, and previously Mark Rothko and Anne Frank, in Drammen reframes the history of the war by placing the Holocaust as the main event and not the occupation and the local heroes.

Confronting History, Confronting Trauma

A central preoccupation in the five novels is the attempt to establish new perspectives on WWII in Norway. Instead of relying on the traditionally antagonistic relationship between heroic Norwegians and evil

Germans, they aim to make the story more complex and multifaceted by including memories and experiences of the occupier. In this way, the novels fall within the horizon of Bull and Hansen's concept of agonistic memory, where the memories of the perpetrators are needed to tell a more coherent story. The aim is not merely to place blame, to feel empathy for the victims, or celebrate the heroes. Instead, the objective is to show war's complex and chaotic nature.

These new versions of the history of WWII include perspectives that are not only Norwegian. It gives voice to perpetrators, enemies, and occupiers; they attempt to show how perpetrators are also victims and suffer from trauma without replacing the victims, and to show how perpetrators and enemies can be complex and individual human beings marred by emotional issues. In this way, they challenge the Norwegian heroic narrative that depends on an antagonistic idea of evil. Furthermore, the agonistic perspectives in the novels also show Norwegians inhabiting different and more problematic roles, such as friends and lovers, helpers, accomplices, bystanders – and even perpetrators.

Taken together, the five novels seek to represent the inner life and conflicts of the German occupiers as a means of writing a new history of the war. A central issue in the reformulation of the history of the war is the inclusion of transnational and global events and memories. In this light, the main event of the war is the Holocaust, which transcends national borders and identities. By including the events of the Holocaust – and to a lesser extent, the traumatic events in post-war Germany – through memories and reflections, the authors reframe Norwegian memories and experiences.

One consequence of this approach is the lack of Norwegian heroes in the stories. Norwegians are everything but heroes. In this sense, the novels seem to imply that the Norwegian story of the war is not only a story of a nation that bravely withstood German occupation but also a story of a cultural trauma that has yet to be dealt with. Instead of blaming a generic enemy, and better approach would be to acknowledge the complexities of the war. In this sense, one of the hopes for an agonistic approach that includes a German perspective would be to confront the Norwegian loss of social meaning through what Ron Eyerman (2012) has deemed as the solution to issues of cultural trauma: working through and reparation. Abandoning the description of the German enemy as a generic evil while discussing questions of guilt, remorse, and forgiveness is an interesting place to start.

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