

# *Babylon Berlin*: A lavish television series about 1920s' Germany

By Sybille Fuchs  
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“To Ashes, To Dust ...” Berlin in 1929, a den of iniquity, a society torn apart, amusing itself to death, a dance on the edge of a volcano against the backdrop of escalating class and street battles.

The horrors of the First World War have been repressed, but are by no means forgotten, crippled war veterans populate the streets, the so-called “tremblers,” severely traumatized by the war, trying to numb their pain with opiates, a flourishing business for gangsters. Military officials and industrialists are working secretly and illegally on strengthening the armed forces.

This is how Berlin is portrayed in the television series *Babylon Berlin*, first broadcast last October on Sky 1, a German-language channel, and now available in 16 episodes on Netflix. It is the most expensive German television production ever made (with an estimated budget of 40 million euros [\$US49 million]). Although the series was produced in part with funding from ARD, the German public broadcaster, it will not be shown on that channel until late autumn.

*Babylon Berlin*, based on the first novel in a series by Volker Kutscher (*Der nasse Fisch*, “The Wet Fish,” but published in English as *Babylon Berlin*), won four prizes at this year’s German Television Awards in January, for best drama series, cinematography, music and production or costume design. It was also nominated in the best director, actor, actress and editing categories.

The series is co-written and co-directed by three well-known figures, Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run*, *Heaven*, *Cloud Atlas*) Achim von Borries (*Love in Thoughts*, *Four Days in May*) and Henk Handloegten (*Learning to Lie*, *Summer Window*). Von Borries and Handloegten also collaborated on the script for *Goodbye Lenin!*

## ”The Golden Years” of the Weimar Republic

*Babylon Berlin*’s action takes place in the German capital, then the third largest municipality in the world, at the end of the so-called Golden Years of the Weimar Republic (1919-1933).

These were several years marked by a certain economic recovery, made possible by the credits provided under the Dawes Plan and the alleviation of conditions for paying reparations imposed on Germany under the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. This period came to a dramatic end with the stock market crash on Black Friday in October 1929 that triggered a global economic crisis.

According to Tykwer, “*Babylon Berlin* is a wide-ranging, multifaceted detective movie featuring many characters situated in a historical context that mirrors current-day Germany and Europe in an astonishing way.” The question arises, does this elaborate spectacle really live up to or justify this description?

Considerable efforts have been made to recreate the period. The film was shot in over 300 different locations. Berlin’s Red City Hall served as the “Red Castle,” i.e., police headquarters. Entire streets or squares in Berlin were either reconstructed in the studio or filmed on original locations with the corresponding changes made to turn the clock back.

Countless vintage cars drive through the streets, passing beggars, the unemployed and passers-by hurrying along to do their business. Along with the main characters, thousands of extras wear costumes inspired by the fashions of the time.

The filmmakers attempt to reproduce the legendary, seductive atmosphere of the 1920s through clothes, design and an excellent soundtrack. The music, a mix of Charleston, jazz, swing and cabaret *chansons* in the style of the day suits the mood of “dancing on the edge of a volcano.” The tune “To Ashes, To Dust,” sung by Countess Svetlana Sorokina, aka Nikoros (Lithuanian actress-singer Severija Janušauskait?), is captivating.

All of this draws the viewer into the vortex of events, but what really took place in Berlin at that time? Kutscher told the *Observer* in Britain, “I’m very curious about this time—an important time, not only in German history. I always questioned how a civilised country, a republic like Germany, could change into this dictatorship. There’s no easy answer to this.”

An attempt to explain how Germany descended into barbarism would of course be welcome. Unfortunately, however, *Babylon Berlin* is palpably unable to explain why the Weimar Republic collapsed and its portrayal of the epoch is riddled with clichés. The real reasons for the coming to power of the Nazis a short time later remain vague or distorted. As a result, any references to the present situation also remain superficial.

German society in 1929 was deeply divided and stratified. On the one hand, the rich and nouveau riche, the bohemian and demimonde amuse themselves in nightclubs, bars, cabarets, the posh restaurants, pornographic cinemas and brothels. On the other hand, bitter poverty, unemployment, prostitution and social discontent prevail within the working class.

In the 1928 elections, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) received the greatest number of votes, more than 9 million (some 30 percent), and won 131 seats in the Reichstag. The Communist Party (KPD), finishing fourth, also gained strongly, winning 3.2 million votes and 45 seats. The government that emerged was a grand coalition of the SPD and various bourgeois parties, the German Democratic Party, the Catholic Centre Party and the German People’s Party, headed by Chancellor Hermann Müller (SPD).

The Nazi party received less than 3 percent of the vote, and 12 seats, but it waits in the wings, taking advantage of the political impasse and growing economic crisis. Meanwhile, big business figures, reactionary monarchists and *Reichswehr* (German military) officers are eager to re-establish Germany as an imperialist great power.

The plot of the series is freely drawn from Kutscher’s historical detective novel. Detective Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch) has been transferred from Cologne to Berlin, where he works together with the young Berliner Charlotte Ritter (Liv Lisa Fries). She comes from an impoverished background and is trying to keep her family afloat by secretarial work at the police headquarters during the day and occasional

prostitution by night in the fashionable Moka Efti nightclub.

The club is run by an Armenian crime boss (Misel Maticевич). A relationship begins between Rath and Charlotte, but is stymied repeatedly in the episodes shown so far. Both actors convincingly portray the complicated stages of this relationship developing beneath their professional collaboration.

Rath's nemesis is commissioner Bruno Wolter (excellently played by Peter Kurth). He is chief of the city's "morals police" and liaison to the "Black Reichswehr" (the illegal paramilitary forces built up by the German military during the Weimar period). At one and the same time Wolter is a loving husband and kind to children, and a brutal sniper and corrupt cop, quite capable of cold-blooded murder when it comes to hiding his activities on behalf of restoring Germany's claim to imperialist greatness.

In addition to Rath, Ritter, Wolter and other fictional characters drawn from Kutscher's novel, a series of historical figures also appear in the course of the series. The latter include the renowned director of the Berlin criminal police Ernst Gennat (Udo Samel), Berlin mayor Gustav Böß (Detlef Bierstedt), German president Paul von Hindenburg (subtly and jovially played by Günter Lamprecht, famed for R. W. Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann (Werner Wölbern) and his French counterpart Aristide Briand (Rolf Kanies), who narrowly escapes assassination during a performance of Brecht-Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*.

Unlike the novel, the series also features a psychiatrist who tries to cure traumatised people like Rath by suggestive therapy (hypnosis), leading them back to the origin of their trauma, the war. This is meant as a portent of the war to come.

#### **A lack of historical comprehension**

The fictional recreation or depiction of historical events, in plays, novels and films, obviously has a long history, with many illustrious examples. As may be recalled, William Shakespeare wrote a few of these.

Many authors, from Walter Scott and Victor Hugo in the 19th century to Lion Feuchtwanger in the 20th, have made outstanding contributions in the field of the historical novel. Soviet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein made serious efforts along these lines, and Hollywood writers and directors in the 1930s and 1940s often ventured into this field, although their fidelity to the letter of historical truth may be seriously questioned.

And that raises a critical issue. To ensure that the historical epoch in question is not reduced to a mere decorative backdrop, not only must the ambience and costumes be appropriate, the dramatist, author or filmmaker must also have absorbed something important about the social relationships, the class and political forces, of the epoch. Here lies the biggest weakness of *Babylon Berlin*, despite its considerable budget and complex storyline. It never seriously grasps the social and political dynamic of the period.

This is most clearly demonstrated by the crucial dramatic action of the series. A group of alleged "Trotskyists," known as the "Red Fortress," smuggle gold out of the Soviet Union to support Leon Trotsky, who has been exiled by the Stalin regime and currently resides in Turkey.

The group commits terrorist acts, prints appeals for the "Fourth International" and is then brutally mowed down in a hail of machine-gun bullets by thugs from the Soviet embassy.

Such antics have nothing to do with historical reality. Trotskyists rejected individual acts of terrorism in principle, and there could be no talk of a "Fourth International" in 1929. The supporters of Trotsky at this point considered themselves a faction of the Communist International.

The need for a new international was not advanced until after the coming to power of Hitler in Germany in 1933, Trotsky's "Open Letter for the Fourth International" was not issued until the spring of 1935 and

the organization was not actually founded until September 1938. This is something more than poetic license.

Trotsky's followers in Berlin did not smuggle gold. Nor did they throw knives at portraits of Stalin, something that also takes place in *Babylon Berlin*. German workers and supporters of Trotsky like Anton Grylewicz and Oskar Hippe fought under extremely difficult personal and political conditions against the disastrous, ultra-left policy of Stalin and his main representative in Germany, Ernst Thälmann.

The Stalinist policy of "social fascism," which argued that the reformist SPD and the Nazi party were "twins," opposed all forms of collaboration between the Communist Party and the SPD, even for defensive purposes. Trotsky wrote many profound, farsighted articles on the situation in Germany from his Turkish exile. He campaigned for a United Front of the KPD and SPD, as a means by which the Communist Party's could win the confidence of workers still loyal to the Social Democrats. His warnings were tragically confirmed after the Nazis were in power and brutally suppressed the leadership of the working class and destroyed its independent organisations. None of this titanic struggle finds so much as an echo in *Babylon Berlin*.

Trotsky's writings from this period answer the question that Kutscher and the makers of *Babylon Berlin* pose themselves: how did "democratic" Germany become a monstrous dictatorship? Concretely, how did two major workers' parties, the SPD and KPD, with several hundred thousand militant members and millions of voters behind them, fail to conduct any effective resistance to Hitler and prevent the Nazis' takeover?

*Babylon Berlin* does not ignore the labor movement and depicts violent confrontations between Social Democrats and Communists. A key episode shows the events of what has come to be known as "Bloody May" in 1929, when the Berlin police headed by Karl Friedrich Zörgiebel (Thomas Thieme) and the Prussian interior minister Carl Severing (both SPD) ordered a brutal attack on Communist workers. The state violence continued from May 1 to May 3, with over 30 protesters and bystanders killed, hundreds injured and 1,200 arrested.

The Social Democratic leadership defended the bourgeois order with extreme brutality—also and especially against workers. However, the KPD, paralysed and demoralised by Stalinist policy, was unable to win workers away from the SPD. In some cases, during the "social fascist" period, the Stalinists made common cause with the Nazis against the Social Democrats.

These life-and-death questions appear only in fragmented and confused form in *Babylon Berlin*. The spectator will not be able to make heads or tails of them. There is a lack of any serious comprehension of the political issues and historical context.

#### **The "Black Reichswehr"**

Other strands of development, such as the illegal rearmament of the *Reichswehr*, are more successfully dealt with in *Babylon Berlin*. The Treaty of Versailles prohibited Germany from maintaining an air force and limited its army to 100,000 men. Despite this, the *Freikorps* [right-wing paramilitary units] and leading military personnel worked to circumvent the ban throughout the period of the Weimar Republic. Large stocks of weapons, ammunition and equipment recovered from World War I were hidden and utilised in secret military manoeuvres held on the grounds of sympathetic large landowners.

The *Reichswehr* leadership was intent on rearming Germany at all costs. *Babylon Berlin* reveals how right-wing politicians established cliques, and how regular army officers, former volunteer soldiers and big businessmen stashed away huge stocks of the most up-to-date weapons and poison gas.

A new and illegal German air force was created in Lipetsk near Moscow. All this takes place more or less under the eyes of the political leadership in Berlin. The SPD, which had won elections with slogans such as "Food for children instead of battleships," voted in 1928 under SPD

chancellor Müller for additional funding for battleships. In a second vote, a short time later, the Social Democratic faction favoured ending the project, but the motion failed to win a majority.

In the television series, the illegal air force is uncovered by a journalist, Samuel Katelbach (Karl Markowics). This recalls the role played by Carl von Ossietzky, who on March 4, 1929 published an article in his magazine *Die Weltbühne* headlined, “Windiges aus der deutschen Luftfahrt” (somewhat loosely translated as “Windy affairs in German aviation”). Ossietzky was subsequently tried at the instigation of the Germany military and sentenced in 1931 to 18 months in prison for espionage. After the Nazis took power, they re-arrested and sent him to a concentration camp. Ossietzky died as the result of his ill treatment in 1938.

These events and the conspiratorial activities aimed at rearming the *Reichswehr*, which ultimately contributed significantly to the Nazi victory, are quite impressively portrayed in *Berlin Babylon*. Nevertheless, it remains unclear why the mighty German labor movement was unable to defeat the reactionary forces and provide a progressive alternative to Hitlerite fascism. In this respect, the entire series is haunted by a pessimistic doomsday mood that offers no way out.

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