

70th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

Curveball—Germany’s role in the Iraq war—and the horrors of the concentration camp in *Persian Lessons*

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This is the third in a series of articles on the Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, which recently took place February 20–March 1. Part 1 was posted on February 28 and Part 2 on March 11.

Curveball by German director Johannes Naber valuably turns a knife in a wound that many in the American and German intelligence communities and governments no doubt hoped had long since healed—the way in which the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was based on entirely fraudulent and lying justifications.

Naber has made a number of notable films, including the immigrant drama *The Albanian* (2009), *Age of Cannibals* (2013) and *Heart of Stone* (2019).

At the premiere of *Curveball* in Berlin, a festival representative introduced the film, but said he could not read out its title. The film festival lists it merely as “Untitled.” The film’s name is currently the subject of a US lawsuit. After seeing *Curveball*, one can see why both the American and German intelligence agencies are exerting considerable influence to prevent its distribution.

Naber’s film is a political satire rooted firmly in factual evidence carefully researched by the director and his team. It begins in Iraq where German biologist Dr. Arndt “Desert Fox” Wolf (Sebastian Blomberg), a biological warfare specialist employed by the Federal Intelligence Service (BND), fails to find any evidence of Saddam Hussein’s alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The head of the BND, Schatz (Thorsten Merten), is eager to outdo the CIA and be the first to prove that Iraq possesses dangerous nerve gas. An opportunity opens up when an Iraqi seeking asylum in Germany, Rafid Alwan (Dar Salim), claims he worked as a chemical engineer in Iraq and has inside knowledge of the country’s chemical weapons programme.

Wolf is given the job of interrogating “Curveball,” the alias given to the Iraqi engineer. In exchange for revealing what he knows (in fact, a pack of lies), Alwan requests he be released

from incarceration in a German asylum centre and given citizenship.

After a series of interrogations, Alwan takes a hint from Wolf himself and reveals that the reason for the failure of all the intelligence services to find Iraqi WMD is the “ingenious” use by the Hussein regime of trucks and trains to move the huge chemical vats containing dangerous gases. Absurdly, the two men agree on a crude childish diagram drawn on a napkin purporting to show a truck mounted with the massive vats. Finally, the BND leadership have a scoop to present to their American “cousins”—and it’s champagne all round for those concerned. The German chancellor at the time, Gerhard Schröder, also sends his congratulations to the BND.

Desperately seeking evidence to justify a US intervention in Iraq, the CIA is only too willing to accept the scraps from the BND’s table. It organises the kidnapping of “Curveball” in Germany in order to present him as its own source. Feeling some obligation to the Iraqi fraudster, BND asset Wolf attempts to rescue him in a hilarious escape scene.

Wolf confronts the CIA agent responsible for the kidnap plan and argues in favour of reliable evidence. The CIA agent is unrepentant: “The truth doesn’t count, only justice matters.” Wolf goes on to ask what gives the CIA the right to distort the facts. “We make the facts,” the female agent responds.

Towards the end of *Curveball*, documentary footage is shown of US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s infamous presentation to the UN Security Council in February 2003 in which he regurgitated Curveball’s lies to justify America’s subsequent attack on Iraq. In his report, Powell stated that Iraq’s weapons programme included “biological weapons factories on wheels and on rails,” an “extensive clandestine network” to supply “its deadly biological and chemical weapons programmes” and the obtaining of “sufficient fissile material to produce a nuclear explosion.” All of this, according to the secretary of state, represented “facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.”

Powell’s presentation included a sketch of a truck loaded

with chemical vats based on Curveball's original napkin drawing. According to one senior US official, Curveball's lies were "the main pillar" of Powell's report to the UN. Sitting in the UN meeting is the German Green Party leader, Joschka Fischer, who listens quietly to Powell's report. BND biologist (in the meantime made redundant) Wolf watches Fischer at home on television and asks, "Why doesn't he say something?"

Fischer was German foreign minister in the government headed by Schröder (Social Democratic Party, SPD). Schröder's head of chancellery with responsibility for liaison with Germany's intelligence services was Frank-Walter Steinmeier (also SPD), currently the country's president.

Naber's *Curveball* graphically demonstrates the duplicity and criminality of Germany's role in the Iraq war. As chancellor, Schröder publicly declared the German government opposed a new war in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Germany's intelligence agency was providing the lies that Washington used to legitimise its assault on Iraq in the name of the "war on terror."

Naber wants to counter what the director declares to be "a false portrayal here, an idealised idea of how we Germans operate in the world." It is important, he argues, to tell the truth and question the role of the secret services and politicians responsible at that time, such as Fischer, Schröder and Steinmeier: "So that children at school can no longer be taught that we were the good ones when it came to the Iraq war."

To heighten the comedic effect of his film, Naber presents the leading BND figures as provincial careerists in thrall to their American counterparts. In so doing, however, the director runs the risk of seriously underestimating the methods and character of the German ruling elite, which has been trying to achieve greater independence from the US since the reunification of Germany in 1989-1990 and is once again flexing its ruthless imperialist muscles.

In that process, the ruling class draws upon the traditions of Nazism. The BND itself emerged from the Gehlen Organisation (1946-1956), named for Reinhard Gehlen, Hitler's chief intelligence officer on the Eastern Front in World War II. After the war, he was recruited by the CIA and headed German intelligence from 1956 to 1968 in close cooperation with the US intelligence agency.

The US bombardment and invasion of Iraq war began a month after Powell's testimony. Naber's film ends with statistics detailing the massive loss of Iraqi lives in the subsequent carnage, a mass murder for which Germany also bears direct responsibility.

The end credits also note that "The head of the state chancellery at that time is the current federal president"—i.e., the Social Democrat Steinmeier. This credit was greeted with loud applause from the Berlin audience who clearly approved of this unmasking of Germany's leading sanctimonious war-monger.

Naber's film is due to open in German cinemas in September of this year as "Film ohne Titel" (Film Without a Title).

Persian Lessons

Another movie that uses black, bitter humour in its treatment of horrifically tragic events is *Persian Lessons*, directed by Vadim Perelman (*House of Sand and Fog*, 2003). The film is based on a short story by one of Germany's leading scriptwriters, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, and opens in occupied France in World War II with the transport of a group of Jews to a concentration camp.

A young man in the back of the truck carrying the Jews begs another young man, Gilles (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart), to accept a valuable book written in Farsi, or Persian, in exchange for some food. Gilles agrees. Shortly afterwards, the truck stops in a forest and the occupants are led off to be summarily shot by the German SA troops responsible for transport to the death camps.

Facing imminent execution, Gilles pleads with the soldiers not to shoot him—after all, he argues, he is not Jewish—he is Persian and has a book to prove it. In a bizarre twist to the narrative, one of the soldiers declares he knows a commandant in the nearest camp who is keen to learn the Persian language, offering 10 cans of meat to anyone who can provide him with a teacher.

In order to survive, Gilles has to invent a phony language that he can administer in daily doses to the camp commandant, Klaus Koch (Lars Eidinger). Given the task of recording new admissions to the camp, Gilles discovers a formula for memorising his inventory of fictitious words. For his part, the camp commandant practices his newfound tongue, proudly pronouncing snippets of the names of Jewish occupants of the camp, all of whom are eventually executed by their Nazi oppressors. The actors portraying the film's two main protagonists, Biscayart as Gilles and Eidinger as Koch, are outstanding.

There are moments of painfully absurdist humour in *Persian Lessons* in the exchanges between Gilles and the camp commandant, but we are not allowed for a moment to forget the tragic fate of the camp's victims at the hands of their brutal captors. The director's juggling of humour and the tragic fate of the Jews under German occupation is reminiscent of the outstanding 1998 film by the Romanian-French director Radu Mihăileanu, *Train de Vie* (*Train of Life*).

To be continued

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