

REVIEW ESSAY

Philip Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, and the (Problematic) Representation of History

Christine Berberich

University of Portsmouth
Email: Christine.Berberich@port.ac.uk

Picture this.

Berlin. 1936.

The private eye Bernie Günther¹ investigates the gruesome deaths of a prominent Berlin businessman's daughter and son-in-law in a house fire. The backdrop is Nazi Germany in the run up to the Berlin Olympics that took place between August 1 and 16, 1936 and that Hitler actively manipulated to present a somewhat whitewashed image of Nazi Germany to the world.

So starts Philip Kerr's bestselling and popular series of Berlin noir novels focusing on the hard-boiled investigator Bernie Günther. Published in 1989, *March Violets* is the first in a series now comprising fourteen novels that only ended with the author's untimely death from cancer in 2018. Kerr started his lucrative career as a novelist in 1989 but had published twenty-nine novels, two works of non-fiction, as well as ten works of children's fiction by the time of his death. In 1993, he was named one of the most promising young British novelists on the important and influential once-a-decade *Granta* list that included, in that particular year, the likes of Jeanette Winterson, Will Self, Hanif Kureishi, and (now Nobel-laureate) Kazuo Ishiguro.² His work, in particular the Bernie Günther historical crime novels, has attracted critical praise as well as acclaim via prestigious literary prizes, among them the 2009 CWA Ellis Peters Historical Award and the RBA International Prize for Crime Writing for the sixth instalment in the Bernie Günther series, *If the Dead Rise Not*.³ The fourteen Bernie Günther novels cover much ground, both in terms of location – with settings ranging from Berlin as the centre of the Nazi Reich to Munich and Vienna, as well as further-flung locations such as Havana, Argentina, Prague, Croatia, Greece, and the French Riviera – and time, with the narrative stretching over several decades. They follow a largely chronological approach, taking Günther from 1936 to 1957 – but with some exceptions. *Field Grey* (2010), the seventh novel in the series, covers a period of twenty-five years and offers a survey of Günther's life up to 1954. The last novel, *Metropolis*, published posthumously in 2019, takes Günther and his readers back to the Weimar Republic and provides more details on the PI's backstory with his recent promotion to the Berlin *Kriminalpolizei's* Murder Squad in 1928.

¹ Some publications spell the name Gunther. The copy of *Berlin Noir* used in this article, published by Penguin in 2021, uses the correct German spelling of Günther. For the sake of consistency and accuracy, this is the spelling used here.

² "The 1993 *Granta* List," *The Observer*, November 16, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/17/fiction.features>.

³ Giles Tremlett, "Philip Kerr wins €125,000 RBA crime writing prize," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/sep/04/philip-kerr-wins-rba-prize>; CWA Ellis Peters Historical Award Winners, *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/award/show/777-cwa-ellis-peters-historical-award>.

So much for the background to the novels. Let us now look at how they could be read.

In a review article of *Prussian Blue*, the twelfth instalment of the Bernie Günther series published in 2017, Jane Kramer, writing for *The New Yorker*, labels Günther “The Third Reich’s Good Cop” and asks in her subheading “Why do we like him so much?”⁴ I will use this statement as the framing question for the following assessment of Kerr’s work, and, not wishing to keep my readers in suspense, will say upfront that I disagree quite strongly with Günther’s label as “the Third Reich’s Good Cop” and that I, at least, do not find him particularly likeable. I will argue throughout this piece that engaging with Kerr’s private investigator at such an emotive level is, given the novels’ setting and subject matter, highly problematic if not outright contentious. To offer a representative sample of his work, this review will focus on the first three novels in the series, commonly referred to as the *Berlin Noir* trilogy that includes *March Violets*, *The Pale Criminal* (first published in 1990), and *A German Requiem* (1991), which chart Günther’s progression from 1936 to 1938, skipping over the war years and fast-forwarding to 1947. In the course of these three novels, Günther not only successfully investigates crimes but also, though admittedly mostly against his will, becomes more and more embroiled in the machinations and manipulations of the Nazi state that bring him into close personal contact with Nazi leaders ranging from Hermann Göring and Reinhard Heydrich to Martin Bormann. Rather than providing a mere review, the following discussion will address a number of specific issues: it will assess Günther’s credentials within the hard-boiled detective genre; it will discuss historical verisimilitude in the novels; and, finally, it will link this to a brief assessment of the corruption of social life and personal ethics during the Third Reich. I will make the case that Kerr’s novels are well researched and attempt historical verisimilitude but, ultimately, fail *because* of the problematic character of his protagonist Bernie Günther.

Bernie Günther is a tough cookie. His longevity – fourteen novels, spanning more than three decades and mostly set during the brutality of the Third Reich – already suggests as much. His credentials are considerable: he has heroically fought in the First World War and was even awarded an Iron Cross for his courage in battle, although he does not care to mention that much. He has lost his first wife to the Spanish Flu and has mourned her ever since – which does not, however, stop him from pursuing women for pleasure in every book. He is cynical and world-weary, yet also cocky and outspoken. He is open about his dislike of the Nazi Party and what it stands for. At the same time, though, he is a realist; Jane Kramer refers to “the radical pragmatism of Günther’s moral compass, which is keyed to neither outrage nor indifference.”⁵ This is key to Günther’s drive to survive and explains the fact that he is, repeatedly, prepared to compromise considerably on his morals. So far, he is a typical representative of the hardboiled detective genre popularised by Raymond Chandler and his character Philip Marlowe during the 1940s. But Kerr does more, cleverly combining this established genre with that of the historical novel, a genre that has enjoyed ever-increasing popularity, in particular in the anglophone world, since the late 1980s.⁶

As a representative of the hardboiled detective, a literary creation that has, historically, predominantly appealed to men, Günther is mainly presented as an “ordinary” man, a guy like many others. Günther refers to himself as “no knight in shining armour. Just a weather-beaten man in a crumpled overcoat on a street corner with only a grey idea of something you might well go ahead and call Morality.”⁷ It is comments such as these that are meant to make it easier for the reader to identify and side with Günther. Petra Rau has pointed

⁴ Jane Kramer, “The Third Reich’s Good Cop,” *The New Yorker*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/10/the-third-reichs-good-cop>.

⁵ Kramer, “The Third Reich’s Good Cop,” n.p.

⁶ Megan O’Grady, “Why are we living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction,” *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/t-magazine/historical-fiction-books.html>.

⁷ Philip Kerr, *Berlin Noir* [comprising *March Violets*, *The Pale Criminal*, and *A German Requiem*] (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 511.

out that “the historical novelist needs to create a protagonist with whom the reader willingly identifies,” while Katharina Hall correctly points out that, traditionally, the detective genre has adhered to a “dominant depiction of the detective as a representative of truth, morality, and justice.”⁸ These two approaches to both traditional historical and detective novels immediately have to be challenged in the case of Kerr’s Bernie Günther novels precisely because they are set in and deal with Nazi Germany: Günther himself is a German who operates within the unethical, if not downright evil Nazi system, not only tolerated by the regime but, more often than not, actively working for it. While not a card-carrying member of the Nazi Party, Günther, nevertheless, works for the state and operates within its ruthless system. The idea of “identifying with” or “sympathising with” the protagonist consequently needs to be problematised from the start – though this is certainly not done by Kerr himself. I will return to Günther’s “compromises” in order to safeguard his future in due course but, in order to do this, it is important that we first look at the issue of historical verisimilitude in Kerr’s novels.

Philip Kerr’s novels, it has to be said, are painstakingly researched. There is no doubting their grounding in historical fact. Kerr knows his Nazi history, he knows German, he knows Berlin. As Kramer puts it succinctly, he “keeps dropping into Hitler’s Germany like a local in a time machine.”⁹ In interviews, Kerr has spoken at length about his interest in history and, in particular, his obsession with Berlin: “I tramped the streets endlessly. [...] This was before the Wall came down, when Berlin was probably the most atmospheric city on earth. I didn’t know that I was going to write a thriller, but the more I got into it the more I realised that I was being the detective; exploring the historical Berlin was like working on a case.”¹⁰ He successfully places Günther in the topography of Berlin in a way that enables the reader to follow his progress on a map:

It was late [...] when I finally drove back to my apartment in Trautenstrasse, which is in Wilmersdorf, a modest neighbourhood, but still a lot better than Wedding, the district of Berlin in which I grew up. The street itself runs north-east from Güntzelstrasse past Nikolsburger Platz, where there is a scenic sort of fountain in the middle of the square.¹¹

Kerr knows in particular the Nazi topography of Berlin; he knows where the main sites of power were, where the Gestapo tortured its prisoners. His novels are atmospheric and certainly conjure up the claustrophobic atmosphere during the Third Reich, the lack of trust, the fear that even close family members might be Gestapo spies, and where everybody, in the cynical words of one of Günther’s associates, expects the “early-morning knock-up from [the] friendly neighbourhood Gestapo man.”¹² Even Günther himself becomes the subject of his colleagues’ “fear and loathing” – representative of the wider population’s fear of Gestapo surveillance – while working for Heydrich in *The Pale Criminal*.¹³ The *Berlin Noir* novels are also successful in painting a realistic picture of the constant aggressions against the Jews, in particular by depicting the all-pervasive propaganda, with *Der Stürmer* churning out anti-Jewish headlines, caricatures, and articles on a weekly basis:

⁸ Katharina Hall, “The ‘Nazi Detective’ as Provider of Justice in Post-1990 British and German Crime Fiction: Philip Kerr’s *The Pale Criminal*, Robert Harris’s *Fatherland*, and Richard Birkefeld and Göran Hachmeister’s *Wer übrig bleibt, hat recht*,” *Comparative Literary Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2013): 290; Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 35.

⁹ Kramer, “The Third Reich’s Good Cop,” n.p.

¹⁰ See the Philip Kerr website: <http://philipkerr.org/about/>.

¹¹ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 10.

¹² Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 388.

¹³ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 333.

It was the front page of an old issue of *Der Stürmer*, Julius Streicher's anti-Semitic publication. A flash across the top left-handed corner of the paper advertised it as 'A Special Ritual Murder Number'. Not that one needed reminding. The pen-and-ink illustration said it eloquently enough. Eight naked, fair-haired German girls hanging upside down, their throats slit, and their blood spilling into a great Communion plate that was held by an ugly caricature Jew.¹⁴

What Kerr describes here in detail is actually the real cover of a particularly infamous *Stürmer* issue from 1934, just one example of many that aptly illustrate his attention to historical detail and the depth of his research.¹⁵ In other instances, he situates the crimes Günther is investigating alongside real-life political events – the Sudetenland crisis of 1938 in *The Pale Criminal*, for instance, or the black market dealings in the immediate postwar years in *A German Requiem*. Kerr also uses the biographies of minor Nazi figures and successfully weaves them into his narratives – the SS men Otto Rahn and Karl Maria Weisthor in *The Pale Criminal*, for instance. A quick Google search shows that both were, in real life, involved in occultism and Ariosophy, which play a vital role in the narrative of this particular novel and further evidence that Kerr did, in fact, do his homework before writing his novels. "Real" Nazi characters are not thrown into the novels haphazardly but in a more meaningful way, connecting their real-life biographies with the relevant plot lines.

Kerr's attempts at verisimilitude can also be found in the linguistic field. His novels are peppered with expressions that are generally used in colloquial German but do not necessarily work in English. Throughout the novels, policemen are referred to as "bulls" – "I flipped out my identification for the young bull...", "I was a good bull in those days"¹⁶ – a slightly derogatory but common term in German, but not one ever used to denote the police in English. To list just a few further examples, there are expressions such as "cut the cold cabbage," possibly signifying "cut to the chase," "slow your blood down," probably a simple "calm down," and the particularly discombobulating "wood stacked in front of the cabin" to describe a woman's ample chest, which might bemuse English readers but would (possibly embarrassingly) make perfect sense to native German speakers.¹⁷ As these are not simply errors slipped into the narrative by a translator, it has to be assumed that Kerr placed them consciously, trying to showcase his own detailed knowledge of German but also to give his German characters more authenticity via linguistic idiosyncrasies. Interestingly enough, the first novel in the series already builds on one such expression: the "March Violets" (or *Märzveilchen* in German) of the title generally refer to latecomers to the Nazi Party who only joined after Hitler had already become chancellor, and indicate those people who were hoping, one way or another, to profiteer from the regime.¹⁸ As Jane Kramer states, "the best thrillers [...] are really social histories [...]. They paint what could even be called ethnographic portraits of societies in which particular kinds of crimes consistently appear and of the people who tend to commit those crimes."¹⁹ In this sense, we could certainly say that Kerr successfully depicts Nazi Germany on a number of levels.

So far, so good. As all these examples show, the *factual* representation of Nazi Germany in Kerr's novels is beyond doubt: the geography is evocative, the history correct, the terminology suggestive. What is, however, questionable is the use that Kerr puts all this to, and in order to assess this further we once again need to return to the character of Günther himself.

¹⁴ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 398.

¹⁵ For the image of the *Stürmer* cover see <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/images/sturmer/dsrm34.jpg>.

¹⁶ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 33. These are just two examples early on in the first novel but more of these can be found throughout all of the Bernie Günther novels.

¹⁷ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, pp. 635, 698, 705.

¹⁸ See, for instance, <https://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/riseofhitler/dictator.htm>.

¹⁹ Kramer, "The Third Reich's Good Cop," n.p.

The question that has to be asked first of all is how *realistic* is a character such as Bernie Günther in the context of Nazi Germany? The answer is a simple one: he isn't. Günther is far too outspoken, far too scathing in his criticism of the regime. Early on in the novel, he confesses that "I'm not a National Socialist, but I'm not a fucking Kozi either: I dislike Bolshevism just like the Party," but he also realises that this puts him in a precarious position: "If you're not for it you must be against it."²⁰ He opines that the country under the Nazis is "in the shit," publicly jokes that Goebbels might have a "cloven hoof," and refers to Göring as "Fat Hermann."²¹ He also makes no secret of the fact that he has always supported the old Weimar Republic and the Social Democrats.²² Comments such as these would have seen many other men sent for an extended spell in a Nazi prison or concentration camp. Bernie Günther, however, seems to stand above the (so-called) Nazi law.

This might, however, also have to do with Günther's ability to play the game: he is able to compromise, and always quick to turn situations to his own advantage. Very early on in the novel series, he ponders that "I guess we've all done well out of National Socialism, haven't we? Proper little March Violets."²³ A comment such as this immediately questions Günther's self-confessed and previously cited "Morality" which even came with a capital M to emphasise its importance. But, throughout the novels, there is not that much evidence of Günther's morality as he navigates the Nazi regime in his quest for survival. Yes, Günther tries to speak up for those who are unjustly persecuted; he tries his best to prevent atrocities. But, in the long run, he is used and manipulated by the regime, or, rather, he lets himself be manipulated by it: he meets Himmler; he meets Göring; he meets and works for Heydrich. He does not push back against them to assert his "Morality." Admittedly, if I take a moment to climb down from my own moral high horse, I might, of course, concede that he has little choice in the matter: Günther is, for instance, blackmailed by Heydrich to spy for him in Dachau, which means being sent there – and being mistreated – as an inmate, an interlude that the narrative glosses over with the rather telling words "How do you describe the indescribable? How do you talk about something that made you mute with horror?"²⁴

Starting out in *March Violets* as a private investigator, Günther soon rejoins the *Kriminalpolizei*, an institution he had belonged to previously but left because he disagreed with the regime, and ends up working in repeated secret missions for Heydrich himself. As a member of the notorious Reich Main Security Office in his role as Kriminalkommissar, Günther automatically has the rank of a "full lieutenant in the SS," a role he rescinds during the summer of 1941 when he requests a transfer to the Wehrmacht in order not to be involved with mass shootings of civilians on the eastern front.²⁵ At this point, Günther clearly *does* make a moral decision. Nevertheless, his position constantly vacillates between being outside and inside the Nazi machine. His motivation to ensure "justice" and be a "Seeker after Truth" consequently has to be taken with a pinch of salt.²⁶ This is a particularly interesting point when we take a moment to consider the traditional role of a literary detective – who is generally unequivocally on the side of law and justice. As Katharina Hall states, this is considerably complicated in the case of Nazi detectives who are pulled between "seek[ing] truth and justice" and "represent[ing] a criminal regime."²⁷

This issue gains particular prominence when Günther himself kills a criminal during his investigations into the serial killings of young German girls in *The Pale Criminal*. When he finds out that the renowned Dr Kindermann is, indeed, responsible not only for these murders but also for dressing them up as ritual killings by Jews in order to provoke a pogrom

²⁰ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, pp. 14–5.

²¹ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, pp. 58, 278, 280.

²² Philip Kerr, *If the Dead Rise Not* (London: Quercus, 2009), p. 5.

²³ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 8.

²⁴ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 247.

²⁵ See Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, pp. 616–7.

²⁶ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 643.

²⁷ Hall, "The 'Nazi Detective' as Provider of Justice," p. 290.

against the Jewish population, Günther kills him in cold blood, “point[ing] the gun at his head and pull[ing] the trigger once; and then several times more.”²⁸ Kindermann’s shooting by Günther is, as Petra Rau says, “one of those ‘killings’ about which the reader is not supposed to raise an eyebrow.”²⁹ As readers, we are expected to condemn the murders committed by Kindermann and, by extension, the Nazis, as *unjust*, but consider the murder committed by Günther as *just*: after all, he has killed a Nazi. The “morality” – or should that be “Morality”? – of his actions is not questioned once in the narrative, and as readers we are left in a morally dubious morass: Günther has not killed in self-defence; he has shot a suspect in cold blood, not just once, but several times over, just to make sure. Günther’s actions could potentially be excused by the fact that, undoubtedly, Kindermann would not have been punished by the Nazi regime that was, ultimately, complicit in his murders. Nevertheless, taking the law into his own hands and meting out his own “justice” is highly problematic as Günther effectively uses the Nazi regime’s own weapons. Günther even comments, just before shooting Kindermann, that “In a civilized society you don’t shoot a man in cold blood” to then conclude “Except that this was Hitler’s Germany, and no more civilized than the very pagans venerated by Weisthor and Himmler.”³⁰ This is when he pulls the trigger, shooting Kindermann “between the eyes” – but this also shows that the killing puts him on the same level as the uncivilised Nazis he has been trying to fight.³¹

Ultimately, then, Günther’s actions at times normalise those of the regime around him – and that makes the novels problematic. As Rau puts it so succinctly, reading novels such as Philip Kerr’s Bernie Günther series “offers the audience the possibility of inhabiting a fascist universe by sharing the perspective of a character who is ostensibly not a Nazi but so often so deeply compromised in his views and actions that the distinction between monstrous Nazism and ordinary fascism is hard to maintain.”³² At this point, the discerning, twenty-first-century reader might say “well, Günther is just a typical postmodern detective who plays with the conventions of the genre” and, at the point of Kindermann’s killing, this might even be a valid conclusion. Postmodern literary detectives are often implicated in morally dubious decisions. However, a truly postmodern protagonist would review his actions; he would assess them; he would problematise them. At the very least, a truly postmodern author would leave space for his readers to critically assess the protagonist’s actions. But Kerr moves on too swiftly and too glibly for that to be possible, and this means that his novels remain historical detective novels in the classic noir fashion rather than achieving the label of historiographical metafiction that would be more in keeping with contemporary literary developments. I will briefly return to this point in my conclusion.

In *A German Requiem*, set in 1947, we encounter Günther on the trail of former Nazi criminals in Vienna. He now completely distances himself from those he used to work for, citing merely an unconvincing but oft-touted “obeying orders” as a reason for his wartime actions.³³ In the same book, however, we also learn that, at the end of the war, Günther had burnt off the SS blood group tattoo under his arm in order to evade execution by the Soviets.³⁴ This further illustrates the point that his position as a “the Third Reich’s good cop” is compromised: at once somebody who is outspoken against the regime and eager to ensure justice, yet at the same time somebody who operates within and, ultimately, helps to uphold the system. The scar under his arm is a lasting reminder of his complicity in the Nazi regime that his actions, at least in the first three books, do little to dispel.

²⁸ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 529.

²⁹ Rau, *Our Nazis*, p. 59.

³⁰ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 528.

³¹ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 533.

³² Rau, *Our Nazis*, p. 66.

³³ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 593.

³⁴ Kerr, *Berlin Noir*, p. 718.

Katharina Hall states that “writers who create Nazi detectives will have varying agendas for doing so, depending on their national and ethnic backgrounds, generational cohort, profession, political outlook, interest in particular historical issues and moral themes and/or desire to create an ‘original’ detective in a competitive literary marketplace.”³⁵ Philip Kerr’s interest in and knowledge of the period is not in doubt. But his agenda is not entirely clear, as the hardboiled detective he created is a conflicted character who inhabits a moral in-between space. Kerr did certainly succeed at creating an “original” detective in a competitive market, and despite the concerns outlined above, Bernie Günther, the hardboiled investigator of Nazi crime has inspired a new generation of investigators, in particular in Germany, where the genre that can be labelled “Nazi Noir” has enjoyed considerable popularity in recent years. The best-known example – and one that is translated into English and has achieved additional success via its impressive adaptation by the German ARD in collaboration with Sky – is Volker Kutscher’s series *Babylon Berlin*. Other examples include Uwe Klausner’s series of historical detective fiction featuring Kommissar von Sydow; Richard Birkefeld and Göran Hachmeister’s 2002 novel *Wer übrig bleibt, hat recht*, whose protagonist, Kommissar Kalterer is plagued by a guilty conscience during his investigation in the last months of the war about his complicity in war crimes but who ultimately consciously chooses to ignore his inner moral voice and take the path of further perpetration; or Jan Zweyer’s 2009 novel *Goldfasan* that focuses on Kommissar Golsten, who also sets out to do the morally right thing but ultimately becomes complicit in the regime. What sets *Wer übrig bleibt, hat recht* and *Goldfasan* apart from the Bernie Günther novels is that the protagonists’ choice to become and remain complicit in the regime offers a complete break with the conventions of traditional detective fiction, where the detective usually remains on the side of law and order. They are moving into the realm of postmodern historiographical metafiction, as they leave space for their readers to assess the fictional detectives’ motivations and actions. Kerr’s Bernie Günther series, by contrast, remains at a more simplistic level – it allows its protagonist to kill; it glibly excuses Günther’s wartime activities as simply having followed orders; it allows Günther in later novels to pontificate about the evil of the Nazis; but it never allows his protagonist to actively and critically challenge his own (moral) decisions.

To come back to Jane Kramer’s assessment that opened this discussion: Bernie Günther is the Third Reich’s cop. Scrap the “good.” And I, for one, still do not like him.

³⁵ Hall, “The ‘Nazi Detective’ as Provider of Justice,” p. 290.