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“How a Democratic Country Could Become a Dictatorial Monster”: A Conversation with Volker Kutscher About His Crime Novels, *Babylon Berlin*, and the Lessons of the Past

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Abstract: The German TV series *Babylon Berlin* is based on the popular crime novels by Volker Kutscher on Weimar Berlin in the 1920s. In this conversation, the author explains his ambitions to make his readers aware how a democracy can change into a dictatorship. He describes his research methods, discusses the relationship of historical facts and fiction, and talks about differences between his books and the series *Babylon Berlin*.

Keywords: public history; Volker Kutscher; *Babylon Berlin*; Weimar Republic; National Socialism

Volker Kutscher, born in 1962, is a German novelist, best known for his Berlin-based Gereon Rath crime series, which serves as the basis for the TV series *Babylon Berlin*. He studied German, philosophy and history, and later worked as a newspaper editor prior to beginning his career as a novelist. His latest novel *Rath* was published in 2024.

Hanno Hochmuth, born in 1977, is a German historian at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam (ZZF) and lecturer in Public History at the Free University Berlin. He served as historical advisor of *Babylon Berlin* and played as an extra in the series. His latest book *Berlin: Das Rom der Zeitgeschichte* was published in 2024 (Figure 1).

1 Introduction

The 1920s are back. This applies not only to the anniversaries that structure German remembrance culture, but also to the threat posed by rising right-wing populism, which reminds

many people of the crisis of the Weimar Republic.¹ It is precisely this crisis that is the subject of Volker Kutscher's work. Kutscher initially worked as a journalist and screenwriter before he began writing historical crime novels. In his ten-volume series of novels about the investigator Gereon Rath, the author has painted a vast social panorama that describes the crisis of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism. The series of novels spans the time from the world economic crisis of 1929 to the November pogrom in Germany of 1938 (“Kristallnacht,” the Night of Broken Glass). The historical events are much more than just a backdrop for the crime cases; Kutscher's hard-boiled crime novels are also great social novels.

The first volume, *Der nasse Fisch*, was published in 2008 and tells the story of Cologne police detective Gereon Rath, who is transferred to Berlin in 1929 and uses his own methods to get ahead.² In the process, he uncovers a conspiracy against the Republic that reaches deep into the police apparatus. The book was a huge success – it was sold in over 100 countries. The city of Berlin plays a central role in the densely researched novel. All the locations in the plot can be pinpointed. Against the backdrop of Berlin experiencing a major tourist boom since the turn of the millennium as the “Rome of Contemporary History,”³ the novel contributed to the historical hype of the German capital.

As a result, a new volume of the novel series was published every two years, just in time for the Christmas season. With each volume, Volker Kutscher opened up another year on the timeline. *Der stumme Tod* was set in 1930, *Goldstein* in

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1 See Hanno Hochmuth, Martin Sabrow, and Tilmann Siebeneichner, eds., *Weimars Wirkung. Das Nachleben der ersten deutschen Republik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020).

2 Volker Kutscher, *Der nasse Fisch. Gereon Rath's erster Fall* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2008). While the German title translates into “The Wet Fish,” it was published in English as *Babylon Berlin* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2016).

3 Hanno Hochmuth, *Berlin. Das Rom der Zeitgeschichte* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2024).



Figure 1: Volker Kutscher and Hanno Hochmuth in 2022 at a presentation of Volker Kutscher's previous novel *Transatlantik*. Credit: Nadja Zobel.

1931, and so on. In this way, the reader accompanies the protagonists on their journey into dictatorship and beyond. At the same time, the volumes address social phenomena of the time. These include everyday anti-Semitism, poverty on the streets of Berlin, criminal gangs, but also the emergence of motor traffic and silent films. Above all, however, it describes how the Prussian police apparatus was destroyed and, from 1933 onwards, fell entirely into the hands of the new National Socialist rulers. Some criminal investigators pursued their careers in the new system, while others resigned from the service.

The last volume of the novel series, titled *Rath*, was published in 2024.⁴ It describes the increasingly systematic persecution of Jews in the Third Reich and culminates in the November pogrom of 1938, which is described in a haunting manner. It also deals with the murder of people believed to be genetically 'inferior' in the context of so-called euthanasia. The main character, Gereon Rath, is forced into hiding. His wife Charlotte even ends up in a concentration camp, where she is subjected to physical and mental torture.

⁴ Volker Kutscher: *Rath. Der zehnte Rath-Roman* (Munich: Piper, 2024).



Figure 2: Extras at the set of *Babylon Berlin*, Credit: Bettina Köhler, 2021.

In the final volume, the actual criminal case takes a back seat to an extent not seen in any of the previous volumes, because it is the state itself that becomes criminal.

Volker Kutscher's novels form the basis for the television series *Babylon Berlin*.⁵ The series by directors Tom Tykwer, Henk Handloegten, and Achim von Borries is considered the most expensive television production in German TV history and has won numerous awards. It was produced by German public television (ARD) together with the private pay TV channel Sky. The first season was released in 2017. Since then, four seasons have been broadcast, and a fifth season is currently in production (Figure 2).

Babylon Berlin has been sold to over 110 countries and reached an audience of millions worldwide. The series has thus had a lasting impact on the image of the 1920s. At the same time, the series skillfully draws on the imagery and myth of Berlin as a modern Babylon.⁶ The characters are often portrayed differently from the book on which the series is based, from which it is increasingly diverging. However, as in Volker Kutscher's novels, the overarching theme is the threat to democracy posed by right-wing forces. This is precisely what makes *Babylon Berlin* so topical and so successful. The books and the series raise awareness of current dangers in a historically grounded way. They are public history in the best sense.

⁵ On *Babylon Berlin* see: Hester Baer and Jill Suzanne Smith, eds., *Babylon Berlin, German Visual Spectacle, and Global Media Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024); Hanno Hochmuth and Bettina Köhler, "Oberflächengenaugkeiten. Zum Geschichtsbild von 'Babylon Berlin,'" in: *Zeitgeschichte-online*, December 2021, URL: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/film/oberflaechengenaugkeiten>.

⁶ See Hanno Hochmuth, "Mythos Babylon Berlin. Weimar in der Populärkultur," in: *Weimars Wirkung*, eds. Hochmuth, Sabrow, and Siebeneichner, 111–25.

2 The Conversation

The conversation between Hanno Hochmuth (HH) and Volker Kutscher (VK) took place on September 5, 2025.

HH: With *Rath*, the tenth volume about Gereon Rath, your novel series, has come to a conclusion. The series begins in 1929, and now ends against the backdrop of the November pogrom of 1938. You said from the outset that you would not go beyond the year 1938 in your novel series. Why?

VK: My aim was not to show World War II and the Holocaust, but to show how a democratic, civilized country can become a dictatorial monster that plunges half the world into war and ruin. For me, 1938 is the point of no return, when the path towards war and the Shoah was finally and irreversibly set. The pogrom night in November marks the final break with civilization.

HH: In various interviews, you have said that you want to counteract historical amnesia with your novels. But isn't the success of your books also based on a certain obsession with history? How do you see the relationship between historical amnesia (*Geschichtsvergessenheit*) and historical obsession (*Geschichtsversessenheit*)?

VK: I do believe that my novels also reach people who are not primarily interested in history, but in other aspects of the world of my characters. Or perhaps in other aspects of history. If I can help people who are interested in 1920s Berlin for purely nostalgic reasons, for example, to understand why that world came to an end and how fragile democracy really is, then that is a great achievement. An interest in history does not necessarily lead to an obsession with history. As important as it is to engage with history, one should never lose sight of the present.

HH: The opening of the novel series *Der nasse Fisch*, published in 2008, deals with the threat to democracy posed by right-wing forces. To what extent have the political problems of our present day caught up with you in your novel series?

VK: In 2008, I naively couldn't have imagined the political developments that we have unfortunately been seeing for some time now, not only in Germany. My aim was to better understand the events before and after 1933, but also to sharpen our awareness of the possible problems of the future and how they are rooted in the present. However, I was thinking more of environmental crises and similar problems; I simply could not imagine that the Western world could experience such a shift to the right again after the experiences of the 20th century.

HH: Your books are captivating because of their wealth of historical detail. How do you do research for your books? What is the difference between a writer and a historian?

VK: I take all the information I can get my hands on, texts, photos, films. And, of course, the city itself, the

architectural legacy of history in Berlin. First and foremost, I consult the works of historians, but I also read biographies of contemporaries and look at old menus, city guides, and advertising brochures. I don't do this according to a specific system; I just collect and collect, and then I comb through this huge pile to find what I can use for my novel, which is always only a small fraction. At the end of my research, however, I always read the daily newspaper from that time, almost as a ritual; for me, this is the ultimate journey through time.

Unlike historians, I don't have to put forward theories or offer explanations; I can simply show what the past might have been like and let my readers draw their own conclusions. I want to spark an interest in history, not write history.

HH: What is your favorite historical detail that you stumbled upon during your research? Are there any historical figures you would have liked to include?

VK: While researching the *Kantgaragen* parking lot in Berlin-Charlottenburg, I discovered a nice detail that I wasn't aware of before, and it concerns the legal situation regarding roadside parking. The large garages in Berlin were not built for drivers from outside the city, but for residents, because it was forbidden to park your car permanently on the roadside. Today, with cars lining the streets on both sides, no one can imagine this, but that's how it was. And this law was only repealed in the Federal Republic in the 1960s, long after the war.

As for historical figures, incorporating them was never really important to me. There are only a few celebrities who cross paths with my characters in my novels, and they are mostly B- or C-list celebrities. That's all it takes; I'm more interested in ordinary people.

HH: How do you balance fact and fiction? Are your literary characters allowed to intervene in the course of actual history?

VK: It is extremely important to me that my characters do not intervene in history. My aim is to show how certain characters react to certain historical circumstances, how they behave. They have to suffer and experience the historical facts and react to them, but they do not intervene in history. I would find that inappropriate, and it would also simplify the complex course of history.

HH: With their montage technique and showdowns, your books are reminiscent of films. With the series *Babylon Berlin*, there has now been a very elaborate and successful television adaptation of the first books since 2017. At the same time, you have continued to write the novel series. What is the relationship between the book and the series? How independent are you still from the film adaptation? Do you now picture the actors Volker Bruch and Liv Lisa Fries as Gereon Rath and Charlotte Ritter?

VK: As the television series has moved further and further away from my novels from season to season, I have

remained very independent of the film adaptation simply because of that. Especially since the approach is completely different: *Babylon Berlin* ends in 1933, which was always the goal of the TV series; but it was important to me to see how my characters act in the world after 1933, which is why I continue the story until the end of 1938. This alone distinguishes the novel project from the series.

For me, the world of the television series and the world of the novel are two different worlds, and that's why I also have different faces in mind for Charlotte and Gereon in my novels. Another reason is that when I saw the first film images in 2017, the Rath world had already been in my head for more than 10 years and had taken on a very concrete form. Even the visually stunning *Babylon Berlin* couldn't change that.

HH: The novel series has now come to an end. Which era will your next books take us to? Or have you perhaps had enough of history for now?

VK: I'm going to linger in the Rath world a little longer. First with *Westend*, a small illustrated collection of stories,

the third I've done with illustrator Kat Menschik, and then with a few short stories from the Rath universe that I still want to write, so that together with the Rath short stories I've already written, we can put together a decent anthology. Only then will I start on the next novel. I can't say yet where and when it will be set, but it will deal with our past in some way, that's for sure.

HH: Thank you very much.

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