

## Novel About Nazi Pornography Scandalizes German Literature

NEW YORK TIMES , March 2, 2004  
By ANDREW BERG

Thor Kunkel spent years researching a relatively secret aspect of Nazi history, the production of pornographic films screened at parties for the Nazi elite.

He used what he learned to write "Endstufe" or "Final Stage," a 622-page historical novel that centers on a biologist at the SS Hygiene Institute in Berlin who oversees production of the films. The story begins in 1941, before any bombs fell on Germany, and portrays the Nazis as a leisure class obsessed with technology and hedonism.

Yet Mr. Kunkel, 40, a native of Frankfurt and the winner of the prestigious Ernst-Willner book prize, has found himself in the middle of a literary uproar.

Rowohlt Press abruptly yanked "Endstufe" from its calendar (it was scheduled to be released in March) and canceled Mr. Kunkel's contract last month.

"I can't warm up to your topic," Alexander Fest, Rowohlt's chief, informed him in a letter. "For you the whole world is the result of sexually driven protoplasm." He accused Mr. Kunkel of "self-indulgent amoralism."

Since then the scandal has played out in the literary pages of the German press. Mr. Fest told the magazine *Der Spiegel* that the book, which he had originally found brilliant, was flawed in its later sections, where the rape of German women by the invading Soviet Army is luridly detailed, and the defeated Germans are portrayed as victims and the allies as war criminals. He called Mr. Kunkel a "Percival reborn as a right-wing thug." *Der Spiegel* accused Mr. Kunkel of glamorizing the Third Reich and of omitting any mention of the Holocaust, noting that "Endstufe" is also the name of a neo-Nazi rock group from Bremen.

Mr. Kunkel says such charges are ridiculous. "I am not a politician," he said, speaking by telephone from Berlin. "I am an artist." What upsets people, he said, is that he applies the same narrative objectivity to his portrayal of the Nazis' perversions, the invading Soviets and postwar America. "It's a book about the moral dimensions of everybody," he said.

Rowohlt Press, which also publishes Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, initially described the book as a novel of "history and sexuality, science and occultism," and praised it as a "dense, minutely researched portrait of morbid Nazi society."

Of Mr. Fest's recent turnaround, Mr. Kunkel said, "He wrote about it as if it were a really bad book of philosophy, and I was a preacher of some weird religion."

Of course notoriety can be profitable. The book has been picked up by another publisher, Eichborn Berlin, and is scheduled for release in April. Without specifying the amount, Mr. Kunkel said he received an advance three times larger than his original one. Wolfgang Hörner, Eichborn's publisher, said in an e-mail message that the book was "a Tarantinoesque novel on sex and science in the Third Reich." He added, "It provides a completely new literary approach to the subject matter."

Volker Berghahn, a professor of history at Columbia University, said he was dismayed that Mr. Kunkel would put his views so bluntly. "If he wants to escape the burdens of the past," he said, "he may wish to remember that there are many who have to live with their experience of the Third Reich and the personal fallout from it in their families all the time."

Mr. Kunkel responded that "we've learned from the past," but that it "can't always be reflected in literature and art in the same pattern."