

Our characters:

Volkskraft (female) [Ethnic strength or people's power] Volkskraft is the most reflective and self-critical of the four figures. Her original meaning is unclear and has such fascist connotations now that she has no choice but to deal with these issues of identity. She can try to interpret herself in a less ideological way, as a sense of people working for common purpose, but this is really difficult. Where is the tipping point between unity and fascism?

Opferbereitschaft (male) [Readiness to sacrifice] Opferbereitschaft seems pained and resigned. He has been giving for years. But for what? How does he know he has made the right choice? He is supposed to be humble (the left hand should not know what the right hand does), but he cannot help but wonder what his readiness to sacrifice has brought. He cannot fail to see how what is considered noble has changed in the last 100 years and is subject to question.

Tapferkeit (male) [Bravery] Tapferkeit has some concerns, but true to his name puts on a brave face and tries to continue as if nothing is different. It hasn't totally escaped his notice that the world has changed in the last 100 years, and he is often now seen as a negative quality. He has the longest lineage of the four, so this perhaps increases his distress to suddenly have his meaning challenged in this way. He feels blamed for the actions of those over whom he had no control.

Glaubensstärke (male) [Unwavering faith] Glaubensstärke is the least troubled of the four by the changes of the last 100 years. As his name suggests, he has an unwavering faith in himself. This steadfastness makes him immune to the sort of self-questioning that Volkskraft and Opferbereitschaft experience. He is not boastful, but most definitely self-assured. He has a certain tranquility. And he's not exactly dumb, but he has no anxiety, no existential angst.

V – I can't hold my tongue anymore. We need to talk.

G – To whom?

V – With each other. With people.

T – What do we need to talk about?

V – Our situation and our history. What we need to do.

O – What do you mean “what we need to do”? Nothing can be done.

G – I'm not sure I even understand what this situation is. What are you talking about?

V – We need to talk about us, about our role as the so-called “virtues of the German people.” We've been here 100 years now, and the world changes, yet we never seem to.

G – Continuity and tradition are important. They are one of our strengths.

T – Yes, we have a connection to history that goes well beyond 100 years, deep roots that ground us, give us stability and a purpose.

V – I know how important tradition is to you both, Tapferkeit and Glaubensstärke, but do you think that we're still relevant? Look at all that's happened in the last 100 years. Shouldn't we change and adapt ourselves to new times?

G – I think we change too much already.

O – Everyone wants to change us, reinterpret us in some way. As if we have no inherent meaning.

V – That may be. But even if you're right, Opferbereitschaft, then there is still a need to talk, if only to assert our own vision of ourselves.

O – To what end, Volkskraft? What do you think it will change? And who will listen? This idea of national characteristics, it's bullshit. We're just a surface for whatever people want to project on us. When they wanted to be strong and proud, we were celebrated. Now they find us disturbing and disgusting because we represent their own fears about themselves. We have no agency of our own.

T – I don't concern myself with what others think or how they behave. The only thing that is important is how I see myself.

G – Yes, you have to believe in yourself and your own abilities.

V – But we can't simply ignore what's happened in the past. We have so much history to sort through, so much to consider in defining ourselves and what role we can play today. Maybe I feel it more than the three of you because I've become the most problematic concept of the four of us. I'm not even in the dictionary anymore.

G – You're too sensitive. Not everything is a personal attack, you know.

T – That's not my problem. Everyone can understand me. I have a very noble origin. I was one of the Platonic virtues: Temperance, Justice, Prudence and Bravery.

G – Plato mentioned Piety as well.

O – (Exasperated, not prideful) Yes, and the Christian virtues included Faith as well as Charity, which can be seen as some sort of inspiration for *Opferbereitschaft*. Now that we've established our lineage and ostracized *Volkskraft*, can we end this? There's no point to this discussion.

V – But that's just the thing: My anachronism may be more pronounced, but it's still there for all of you as well. Who identifies with either the Platonic or Christian virtues anymore? And even if you three can trace your heritage back further, the choice to put you in here with me reflects a very specific political mood and set of goals from the late 1800s. Our builders were called the German Patriot's League, and they were quite open about promoting certain qualities as not just characteristics, but virtues. We were conceived as not just a national symbol, but a nationalist symbol. There is no getting around that.

G – That may be, but in your implied critique, you are completely ignoring the tenor of the times. It was an age of expansion, and nationalism in the positive sense. This idea of a strong nation, faithful and brave, ready to fight for what it deserves – this was not unique to Germany, you could see it around the world back then. We were no different or worse than anyone else.

V – But does that somehow make it better? Once the *zeitgeist* changed and we were still following this nationalistic course, what then? What about the things that happened then, how we were used to encourage them? Don't you feel some sense of responsibility for that?

T – Why should I feel responsible for things I did not do?

- O – (More resigned than angry.) It doesn't matter. There's nothing we can do about how we were conceived or how we've been used or misused in the past. It doesn't change what happened. The best way to avoid it in the future is to not get involved.
- T – No, it's not in my nature to hide. If there is a problem, I want to deal with it head on. I just don't think there is one.
- V – Opferbereitschaft, you are the last one of us that I'd expect to suggest retreating to some sort of insular existence. But you also illustrate my point exactly – we have changed. We are not the qualities that we were 100 years ago, or even 50. How others define us, as positive or negative, has changed, and has changed us. I fear that you're right, we are not only irrelevant, but also despised.
- G – You talk about responsibility, Volkskraft, what about responsibility to one's own country? Isn't that still important? To think of the greater good?
- O – And who decides what that greater good is? Tapferkeit mentioned the Platonic virtues, but we are not them. We have no justice to guide our faith, no temperance to moderate our bravery. The four of us together have no leadership qualities, so we have simply waited for someone else to direct us.
- G – You're wrong. We are simply from another time, a time when a great nation expressed itself through its strength, the strength of our people – Volkskraft.
- V – That's exactly my point! Maybe that was how we were, maybe that was even how the whole world worked back then, but we've changed, or should have changed in the meantime. And I worry that we haven't. We're still waiting for someone to lead us because we don't want to take responsibility for ourselves. We want the safety of the group and the feeling of belonging to something bigger, but we aren't self-reflective enough to question where the group is going. No one wants to risk standing against the crowd.
- G – Our problem isn't that we lack self-reflection; the problem now is that people like Opferbereitschaft are afraid of us asserting ourselves. We're always supposed to be ashamed of ourselves.

T – Look, I don't agree with you, Volkskraft, but let's say I did. What is something concrete you could do to change this situation? I mean, yes, horrible things have been done in our names, but we did not ask for that. Not only is it hard for me to feel personally responsible for what's been done, but I also don't see what we can do differently moving forward. I'm tired of being the ones who are always at fault, apologizing for ourselves and inculcating each successive generation with guilt. It's time to point the finger at others, to say, "We're not the only bad ones, look at what you've done, you're just as bad."

G – Indeed. I miss simple national pride. We've had enough self-doubt. It's time to believe in our positive qualities, to recognize our contributions...

V – (Almost interrupting) I'm tired of apologizing for myself, too. Sometimes I don't even really know what it is that I'm apologizing for. Sometimes it feels like I'm just apologizing for being German, but I also think that there's something we haven't really dealt with yet. We've made ourselves feel guilty, we've made ourselves look humble, but we've never really gotten to the root of things, never really dealt with the things that happened. Sometimes I think our self-reflection is just superficial, a show for ourselves and others. We need to stop worrying about what others do and really take responsibility for our own actions. And I don't just mean this in the sense of trying to make up for something done in the past. We need to realize how those problems are still with us. (Pause)

I blame Tacitus, actually. This depiction of us as a brave and noble people, and tying those traits to a warlike nature. Somehow we began to believe this story about ourselves, and so even now we say that something, some behavior, is "in our nature" – as if we can't change it. In trying to be strong, we make ourselves hard. I feel so trapped by ideas about what Germans are supposed to be – punctual, orderly, bureaucratic...

G – (Almost interrupting) But there has to be a connection to something bigger than yourself. Society sets the norms for behavior, and we've decided to value certain qualities as a society. If we give those up now, then who do we become?

- V – I’m not denying that those are important questions, but I don’t think we should continue without self-awareness just for the sake of tradition. We rely on tradition, saying “that’s the way it’s always been done”, without asking if that way still makes sense. We leave no room for new ideas, new ways of doing things. When someone comes to us, and they have a different way, we simply expect them to adapt to us rather than see if we should change and adopt what they do.
- G – You’re not talking about self-awareness, you are talking about self-doubt, self-loathing. We have our traditions because they work.
- V – Can you really say that?
- G – We can’t not follow these traditions. They are what define us. Without them, who are we?
- T – I agree. It is our belief in ourselves that carries us through. A willingness to stand by our cause when all appears lost. This is bravery.
- V – But when does that become simple obstinacy or foolhardiness?
- O – It’s true, time after time we repeat the same mistakes. We cannot be trusted. We have not learned our lesson.
- G – And what lesson is that?
- V – To see things from another’s perspective. To not be so petty about defining everything so exactly. To try to understand the value of another way of being and incorporate that into ourselves.
- O – You’re expecting too much from people. People are afraid of what we four stand for because they are afraid they don’t know how to judge whether a cause is just. You hear it in the stories about during the war, how no one had to be bribed with groceries to march in the NS parades, that everyone did it willingly and with enthusiasm. The faith in the group has been shattered, yet there is still an instinct to stick together against the outside. There is nothing you can do except try to remove yourself from a position where you can do harm and take care of those closest to you.
- G – Opferbereitschaft is right. We cannot rescue the world. We should not sacrifice our own well-being for that of others. This is not our responsibility.

V – Does your own well-being really feel so threatened? What about the social state? Isn't that also part of how we define ourselves?

T – That's different. That's something for us!

V – But isn't it based on the idea of sympathy for others, of inclusion? Or is it merely another way of pushing responsibility onto someone else, in this case the state? Sometimes it feels like we've lost the sense of responsibility to each other on the personal level. Maybe we're not rounding up people into camps anymore, but we are still excluding others, defining ourselves in such a way as to exclude whole segments of the population. Adherence to tradition and language are not the only things that make a nation, are they? We say that we are a nationality, but we really still think of ourselves as an ethnicity, as some kind of tribe, and use that to define what it means to belong here.

G – We are not an immigration country! It doesn't work that way here.

V – Why not? The declining birthrate isn't just a problem for my self-definition as Volkskraft. Soon we won't be able to continue our beloved social state because there aren't enough workers to support the aging population. Why not use immigration to solve this problem?

G – Immigration is fine as long as people come here, work or go to school and then go back to where they came from. And they need to assimilate while they're here. We've all seen that the multi-cultural society has failed.

V – When did we ever even try to have one? All I have seen is a constant stratification, a separating of "them" from "us". We need to try harder.
(Pause)

T – (as a non sequitur, almost to himself) Sometimes I think what is missing is a sense of lightness to the national character. Others have this ability to laugh at themselves, to not take everything so seriously.

V – This idea of character is something fixed, but identity is fluid and changing. We can remake ourselves, identify with new characteristics, reinterpret what we stand for. I mean, each of us could be interpreted in a positive light. Making a sacrifice doesn't have to mean being a victim. Bravery can be the courage to stand up against oppression...

- O – (softly, not as a challenge) And you? How do we rehabilitate Volkskraft? Look, here’s the problem with trying to reinterpret us positively: We’re not independent individuals. There’s the four of us, and it’s true that none of us is inherently bad, but when we’re put together, it’s not just the lack of Temperance or Justice, or even Hope, it’s the addition of something else that makes Tapferkeit into an eagerness for war and conflict, Glaubensstärke into blind faith, Opferbereitschaft into martyrdom and Volkskraft into chauvinistic nationalism.
- V – (Sighing) Maybe you’re right. I mean, it’s really a stretch to interpret me positively, isn’t it? I try to tell myself that Volkskraft can represent the power of people working together toward a common goal, but that’s just as easily something negative as it is something positive. And besides, you know that’s not what was meant just by looking at me. What was meant isn’t very clear either, but even as the only woman here I’m the least individually defined of the four of us. My main purpose is as a prop for these suckling babies – they are the important figures, the future of the country, not me. But I suppose irrelevant is better than dangerous.
- O – Even if we could reinvent ourselves, we would still be faced with the problem of trying to speak about some sort of group identity. Isn’t trying to describe some sort of cohesive distinctiveness the same mistake that was made when building this monument? We weren’t created as a reflection of what had actually happened in the Völkerschlacht, but as a form of wish fulfillment – or worse yet, a didactic exemplar of the ideal German. We’re just another prop trying to bolster the idea of a long German history.
- V – Maybe the way out is to stop discussing it, then, or at least to try to find new terms. Maybe it’s not about “what it means to be German?”, but really “what it means to be human?” We need to stop thinking about ourselves as some sort of monolithic unit that struggles against others in some kind of zero-sum game.
- O – But this is really something superhuman that you ask – to rise above what we think is our nature.

- V – Isn't that part of what actually makes us human, though? The ability to think beyond our individual gain? Why not expand that so that we don't think only about what's best for our families or even our country, but for everyone – become true world citizens? We could lead the way to a new society.
- O – I think we tried that before. More than once. I don't think we should be leading anywhere.
- G – Speak for yourself! You can't even agree that there is a need for change, let alone what form it should take.
- V – But we're here and we're not going anywhere. So something has to be done. We can't just sit here with a warning sign in front of the building – Danger: History. And we can't prevent people from coming here. People will always bend monuments to suit their needs. Interpretations are not fixed.
- O – This is true. It's impossible to lead people by the hand to one "correct" interpretation. They will always see us through the lens of their personal experiences and beliefs, picking and choosing what they identify with or reject.
- T – I don't know. I need to think about it more.
- V – (Sighing) How much longer can you think about something but not take any action? You may be brave, but I am beginning to think you don't have any courage.
- T – What's that supposed to mean?
- V – We talk and talk about things, but do we ever make a decision? If we don't like something, do we take it upon ourselves to change it? And is this because we want someone else to do it or is it because we are so afraid of taking responsibility for our actions?
- O – So we come back to the same questions. We're merely traveling in a loop. There is no way out.