

# The death throes of a criminal regime

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*Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, script by Bernd Eichinger

*Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich (Der Untergang)* is a film well worth seeing. More than three million people have seen *Downfall* in the first four weeks following its release in Germany, and the film's content has provoked a vigorous discussion in the media. The film reconstructs the events that took place in and around Hitler's bunker in Berlin between April 20 and May 2, 1945, during the final days of the Second World War.

Bernd Eichinger has produced films such as *The Name of the Rose* and *The House of Spirits*, and comedies such as *Maybe, Maybe Not* and *Rossini*. He is Germany's most successful producer and has up until now largely avoided complex cinematic themes. His script for *Downfall* is based on the autobiography of Hitler's secretary Traudl Junge, *Bis zur letzten Stunde*, and the book *Downfall (Der Untergang)* by the journalist and historian Joachim Fest.

Fest is well known as the long-time editor of the conservative *FAZ* newspaper and is the author of an extensive biography of Hitler, which provoked controversy because it seeks to explain National Socialism principally on the basis of the personal characteristics of Hitler and suppresses the broader social and political context of Hitler's rise to prominence. Eichinger's script largely avoids Fest's interpretation and concentrates on the extensive factual material surrounding the last days of Hitler. The 45th Historians Conference, held recently in the northern city of Kiel, praised the film for its historical accuracy.

The first Soviet grenades explode in the centre of Berlin on Hitler's birthday. A short while later, the war has reached the middle of the capital—horror and chaos prevail. Death and panic are omnipresent, bombs explode, the wounded cry out. At the hellish heart of it all, children take on Russian tanks with bazookas to ensure the “final victory.”

Largely shielded from these events, we witness the complete moral collapse of the Nazi leadership. Nothing is left of the “thousand-year Reich” aside from the despicable, demoralised remnants of Hitler's closest supporters, who are attempting to drink themselves into oblivion in the comfortably furnished bunker.

Officers of the German army (*Wehrmacht*), who had regarded themselves as the nation's elite, have lost all control, howl drunkenly or discuss the most effective way of shooting oneself. Events in the bunker assume the grotesque form of a nightmare. Eva Braun, shortly to become Hitler's bride, throws wild parties as the exploding grenades come ever closer.

Hitler screams at his generals. Poring over a map, he manoeuvres armies for the defence of Berlin that have long ceased to exist, and feels betrayed by those who in better days had glorified him as the brilliant leader. Hitler is especially bitter over his old “faithful follower,” Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler, who wants to do a deal with the allied forces.

Himmler expresses his hopes of convincing Roosevelt to retain the SS after the war in order to maintain control over the German population and secure law and order. Hitler and Goebbels continue up to the last minute to hope for a military alliance with the US against their common enemy—the Bolsheviks. Then the Red Army advances to the proximity of the bunker itself.

Even as the leader declares that “everything is finished,” child soldiers are still being sent to their death while Goebbels's assault troops hunt down those civilians who are unprepared to fight. Cornered by the Gestapo in their apartments, they are shot on the spot as traitors.

Eventually, the hard core of Hitler supporters take their own lives while others try to save their skins—rats leaving the sinking ship. Confronted with his own personal downfall and the prospect of a life after the Third Reich, Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, in a fit of courage, informs Hitler that over a period of time he refused to follow his orders for a complete destruction of civil infrastructure in Germany. Leading army commanders express their concerns for the fate of the civilian population, only to then abruptly carry out Hitler's ruthless and senseless orders.

One young woman, the 25-year-old secretary of Hitler, Traudl Junge, looks on with growing bewilderment and horror as a facade implodes, leaving nothing behind but filth and chaos.

The people wanted it this way, propaganda minister Goebbels maintains—after all, they voted for the Nazis. Now they will have “their throats cut,” and Reichschancellor Hitler cynically declares that the German people had proven to be too weak in the natural struggle for survival and therefore deserve to perish. A capitulation is out of the question. In front of his bombastic model for his fantasy city—Germania—Hitler maintains that there is one advantage arising from the complete destruction of the German capital—for its reconstruction, one only has to clear away the rubble.

In the final stages of his life, he is concerned only with how he can most effectively commit suicide. The egocentric wretchedness in the bunker reaches its high point with the murder by their own mother of Goebbels's six innocent children—Nazi Germany's “model family”—before father and mother follow their children and take their own lives.

The figure of Hitler is portrayed in a credible and vivid fashion

by the Swiss actor Bruno Ganz. For the first time, the attempt has been made in German film to portray Hitler as a real figure rather than as a caricature or simply as a beast. The attempt is impressive and represents a qualitative step forward by which future films on the theme of National Socialism will be measured.

But it is not just the character of Hitler that is at the heart of the film. The film shows the unparalleled indifference and contempt by the Nazis for the broad masses of working people. A small elite employed brutal violence and trampled on the most elementary rights of the majority of the population—to the point of their mass extinction in the course of war—all in the name of the “unity of the nation.”

The officer caste heading the German army, with its traditional deep roots in the German aristocracy, had little time for democracy and largely shared the Nazi outlook. This layer was deeply implicated in the crimes committed by the regime. Up to today, influential circles in the army stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the responsibility of the Wehrmacht for Nazi crimes—often by explaining that the implicated officers had taken a personal oath of loyalty to Hitler as the supreme representative of the German people and therefore bore no responsibility themselves.

The grotesque unwavering loyalty of the army leadership to Hitler, one man who had lost all sense of reality some time before, results from their basic contempt for humanity and this elitist outlook. The decision by the military to continue the struggle, although the situation for the people as a whole was hopeless, reflected their social perspective. Only after the death of Hitler and Goebbels are a few army commanders prepared to capitulate.

Others prefer to shoot themselves rather than relive a repeat of the “disgrace of 1918”—which also burdens Hitler in the film—German capitulation after defeat in the First World War. This defeat not only led to German subordination to the victorious allies via the treaty of Versailles, but also resulted in a popular uprising and the eruption of socialist revolution in Germany.

To further the dramatic content of the film, its makers have attempted to uncover positive figures with whom the audience can identify. These leads to some historical figures being depicted in an overly favourable light.

For example, there is Himmler’s adjutant and brother-in-law of Eva Braun, Hermann Fegelein, who is shot for desertion. The film presents him as a figure who was at least prepared to question the servile mentality that prevailed in the army. However, the historical record reveals a different Fegelein.

In 1928, he joined the Bavarian police force in Munich. After the dissolution of the state police, he joined the Nazi SS and after the beginning of the war was instrumental in constructing the mounted “death’s-head” (Totenkopf) special unit of the SS. As a leader of his brigade in Poland and the Soviet Union, Hermann Fegelein ordered so-called “cleansing operations,” and his unit combed the swamps of Pripjet for “partisans.” His principal victims were thousands of Jews. Even within the SS he won a reputation as an unscrupulous careerist who manoeuvred himself into Hitler’s presence by deliberately marrying the sister of Eva Braun.

In *Downfall*, the doctor Professor Schenk, through whose eyes we see the suffering of the wounded, exudes the humanitarian selflessness of a Red Cross medical orderly. In fact, Schenk had

been a member of the Nazi SA since 1933 and later held senior posts in the SS and Wehrmacht. He was instrumental in installing an herb plantation in the concentration camp of Dachau. Hundreds of internees died in the course of their forced labour on the project. He used other camp prisoners as human guinea pigs for experiments in which many lost their lives. The film’s depiction of his humanitarianism has more in common with Schenk’s own memoirs than reality.

And was Traudl Junge really so untouched by the dictatorship during which she reached adulthood, bearing in mind that she was the daughter of a member of the NSDAP?

Despite these weaknesses, *Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich* is a complex and impressive piece of work. The film shows the final days and hours of a clique that had plunged the world into a murderous war and now attempts to thrust aside any responsibility for the collapse and catastrophe that ensues. As the disastrous consequences of their actions becomes increasingly evident, the reaction of Hitler and Goebbels is to pursue even more doggedly and brutally their policies—along the lines of the motto “Who cares what happens when I am gone!” In their legacies, which they dictate to Traudl Junge before their deaths, both men refer to their “love” of the people, whom they had served. In reality, they are consumed with contempt for the masses and visions of their own importance.

The catastrophic consequences and end of this regime also have such ominous reverberations under circumstances where similar tendencies can be identified in contemporary politics.

One example is the Bush government in the US. The more the situation in Iraq spirals out of their control, the more the government and military respond by lining up their next victim—potentially Iran. At the same time, the methods used in Iraq against the civilian population become ever more brutal. Torture is carried out in the prisons as a matter of course, and the most vicious bombardment undertaken to crush any resistance. As popular opposition grows to the occupation, the brutality of the US army increases. As its policies transform increasingly into a debacle the government presses ahead with exactly the same course—but with renewed ruthlessness.

This is also a foretaste of what the population of the US can expect when the ruling elite no longer see the possibility of being able to suppress by traditional measures the enormous social conflicts surging under the surface. The ruling class then requires figures at the head of state who are prepared to employ the same level of brutality and unscrupulousness that characterised the leadership of the Nazis.



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