

Mein Führer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler: Ignorance of the subject is not a good starting point

Stefan Steinberg
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Mein Führer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler, written and directed by Dani Levy

In 2004, the Swiss filmmaker Dani Levy was able to win a broad public in German-speaking countries for his film *Go for Zucker!* in which he used his own Jewish background as the basis for a comedy dealing with contemporary German stereotypes of Jews and vice versa. Although *Go for Zucker!* was able to win a sizeable audience in Germany, it drew harsh but thoroughly unjustified criticism from some quarters. When the film was shown in Jerusalem, sections of the audience responded to Levy's sympathetic but critical look at Judaism by accusing him of Goebbels-type anti-Semitic propaganda.

After the furor and success of *Go for Zucker!*, Dani Levy has now turned his attention to the even more controversial theme of National Socialism and has made the first ever comic film in the German language centred on the figure of Adolf Hitler. The result is a comedy that is not only largely unfunny but also, despite all the alleged intentions of its maker, serves to relativise the crimes of the German dictator.

German artists and filmmakers largely steered clear of fictional representations of Hitler for much of the post-war period, but it is worth noting that the nervousness of artistic circles to deal with the issue of Hitler and his crimes was matched by the temerity of cultural and political authorities. Chapin's comic masterpiece *The Great Dictator* (made in 1939) was first released in a handful of West German cinemas in 1958, while Ernst Lubitsch's comic pastiche of Nazi rule in Poland *To Be or Not to Be* (made in 1942) was first shown in West German cinemas in 1960. Now, Levy has taken the step of portraying Hitler and National Socialism on film but, as we shall see, his approach is fundamentally flawed.

Mein Führer is set at the end of 1944 in a period following a series of major military setbacks for the German army on the Eastern front. The divisions in the German ruling elite over the future path of the war have found a (literally) explosive expression in the unsuccessful assassination attempt carried out by leading Nazi officers and politicians in July 1944. As the film opens, we witness Hitler (played by the anarchic German comedian Helge Schneider) undergoing a crisis of confidence at a time when the Nazi leadership, and in particular propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, desperately needs the Führer to give a rousing New Year's speech to rally popular support for what is already a lost cause.

To this end, Goebbels permits the talented Jewish actor Adolf Grünbaum (played by the fine German actor Ulrich Mühe) to leave his concentration camp to rapidly coach the dictator for his speech to the

masses. Grünbaum's efforts are not restricted to acting lessons—he also takes an interest in Hitler's psychological problems and probes Hitler's past to uncover an unhappy childhood dominated by the beatings inflicted by the fascist leader's violent father. The final scene deals with Grünbaum's tragic end, following attempts on his part to subvert Hitler's speech.

Most of the humour in the film is crude and puerile. Nazi adjutants have names like Rattenhuber or Puffke and raise their arms in Hitler salutes every few seconds. Himmler appears in the film with his arm in a sling—we presume, due to muscle fatigue caused by too many Nazi salutes.

To assist in the process of preparing for his speech, Grünbaum insists that Hitler replace his military uniform with a shabby tracksuit and walk around the room on all fours. In the course of the exercise, Hitler is mounted by his dog, Blondie, who in another scene is shown wearing his own Nazi uniform. A later scene features Hitler in bed unable to satisfy his mistress, Eva Braun. As he lies on top of her, she says, "I can't feel you, Mein Führer." He replies limply: "Then I will make myself greater."

In one of the rare amusing moments of *Mein Führer*, Hitler's barber accidentally shaves off half his moustache shortly before he is supposed to give his speech. The dictator begins to rant and rage in such a manner that he loses his voice only minutes before he is due to address the rally.

Alongside the investigation into the psychological problems of the dictator, a second strand of the film deals with the conflicts undergone by Grünbaum and his family. At one point in the film, Hitler seeks to reassure Grünbaum that the Nazi elimination of the Jews "was not meant personally." Grünbaum, for his part, has the opportunity at various points to kill the dictator, but refrains from doing so, because, as he says to his wife at one point, "then one would be no better than Hitler himself." Towards the end of the film, Grünbaum pleads for a sympathetic stance toward Hitler, who, after all, is a broken man due to "the beatings he had received as a child."

Predictably, Levy's latest film has been criticised by various lobbies that declare that in principle it is wrong to use the medium of comedy or fiction as a whole to deal with the activities of the Nazis and the consequences of the Holocaust. Such reaction to Levy's film in Germany and elsewhere recalls similar criticism made of the recent film *Downfall*, dealing with Hitler's last days in the Führerbunker. According to such critics, including prominent figures from the German Jewish community, it is impermissible to depict Hitler as a "human being." Such standpoints are of course nonsensical and crude

metaphysics.

Nevertheless, Levy himself regards his new film as a sort of counterweight to such films as *Downfall* and other documentaries about the Third Reich. Levy declares that his problem with such presentations is that they take themselves so “unbelievably seriously.”

In one interview, Levy states: “Even films like *Downfall* or *Schindler’s List* are based on facts which victims and survivors actively provide, but this authenticity can be paralysing. In order to bring something to light, a film has to penetrate behind the surface of documentarism. My most important goal was to explore the nature of dictatorial authority. A dictator’s authority is based on total submission, and any film which requires submission is dangerous because it extends the system of injustice in its own way.”

Levy prefers, he says, “film which is dialectical and which engages in critical thinking,” and he reacts negatively to what he calls “the dogmatism of authenticity.”

Levy categorises films based on facts and that strive for authenticity as exercising dictatorial authority. Such methods, he says are ways of “requiring submission.” While such notions are commonplace in modern German “left” sociology, *Mein Führer* is proof that they are of little help in developing a compelling and entertaining film.

Levy’s reaction to what he regards as the oppressive results of any reliance on facts is to avoid any serious study of the rise and development of fascism. In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Levy told a reporter “Almost out of an act of defiance I did not want to do any research for this film. I thought the less detailed knowledge I have, the more independent I could remain with regard to fictional representation.”

Although the past few years have seen a resurgence of interests and a large expansion of historical research into National Socialism, including the very valuable two-volume biography of Hitler by the English historian Ian Kershaw, Levy boasts of never having read a biography of the Nazi dictator.

The only book he has read that bears any relation to the subject matter of his film is *For your own good* written by the Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller, who argues that the primal source of Hitler’s crimes stemmed from a traumatic childhood of parental abuse. (Miller has also undertaken a *remote* psychological study of Stalin to argue that the millions of victims of Stalinism were linked to the Russian dictator’s own childhood traumas.)

Levy argues that the responsibility for the rise of National Socialism and the subsequent plunging of Europe into political catastrophe and war has its ultimate roots in the “poisonous” values propagated by the German educational system, which affected all Germans. “I’m not just talking about Hitler but also millions of Germans who grew up with poisonous pedagogy.” Levy concludes of Hitler: “He wanted someone to listen to him. He should have been in therapy.”

Hitler’s personality defects based on his unhappy childhood, according to this argument, played a principal role in his emergence as a national leader of a population ready to support him because the latter were subjected to the same educational values and system. This is the simplistic and misguided conception defended by Levy, which emerges very clearly in his film. This is a pathetically weak basis for any treatment of National Socialism, including the comical, the satirical or in the form of a lampoon.

Levy sneeringly rejects the notion that any sort of real research or attention to social and political development could assist his comic purposes. He is also largely disdainful of the lessons that can be drawn from history, but it is worth noting that Chaplin directed his *The Great*

Dictator in a period when the actor/director was making an increasingly critical investigation of the realities of modern society. Just a few years earlier, Chaplin had completed his film *Modern Times*, which presents a scathing critique of modern capitalist society.

Chaplin had problems even getting his film *The Great Dictator* finished and shown in America because of its penetrating and dramatic portrayal of the danger of Hitlerite fascism and in particular for the final speech in which Chaplin warns of the danger of blindly following *any form* of patriotic nationalism. A few years later Chaplin was severely criticised, and eventually witch-hunted, for his political partisanship and support for the Soviet Union in the war.

The example of Chaplin and *The Great Dictator* could be multiplied many times over. Great comedy, like great drama, requires careful attention to the facts of social reality and respect for historical development. Dani Levy should bear in mind that there is long tradition in German ideology—art and politics, in particular—that shares his antipathy to facts, authenticity and research, and instead prefers to elevate the intuitive qualities of the artist.

In fact, such ideas occupied a central place in the political movement Levy is seeking to ridicule. In this respect, Levy could draw a lesson of warning from the position adopted by the central figure of his film. In a report on culture in 1934, Adolf Hitler praised the type of anti-intellectualism that infused his own movement. “National Socialism is a reaction against Jewish intellectualism. It is a return to intuition.... Literature has done more than anything else to alienate peoples.”

This is not to amalgamate the director and the fascist leader in any way, but there are dangers in such an outlook. No one can doubt Levy’s sincerity or desire to deal with the issue of Nazism, and the director does not exclude the dangers of similar developments in modern society, but to the extent that he closes his eyes to any real examination of the origins of National Socialism his film largely muddies the waters. Under conditions in which new generations of young people are seeking clarity about the abominations committed by National Socialism, *Mein Führer* only serves to spread confusion over one of the seminal experiences of the twentieth century.



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