

# A Woman in Berlin: Germany at the end of World War II

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Directed by Max Färberböck, written by Färberböck and Catharina Schuchmann, based on the book by Anonyma

In his latest film *A Woman in Berlin* (*Anonyma—eine Frau in Berlin*), Max Färberböck (*Aimée & Jaguar*) deals with a topic that has long been taboo in Germany: the mass rape of German women by Soviet soldiers at the end of the Second World War.



A diary treating these events, published in Switzerland in 1959, unleashed a storm of indignation in West Germany—not, however, about the rapes, but over the woman's alleged lack of morals. Shocked, the author, a female journalist, ensured the book was never again published in her lifetime. In 2003, it appeared for the first time in Germany, anonymously.

The film relies on this material. It shows how the young urbane journalist and photographer "Anonyma" is just as at home in Paris as she is in Berlin or London at the beginning of the war, looking optimistically to the future. She and her middle class girl-friends experience fascism positively, as an era of energy. Gerd, her husband, shares her confidence—he will soon be back from the war—which is only a small matter.

The scene changes: The same woman walks laboriously over the rubble, through smoke and explosions. Berlin, April 1945. The civilian population no longer believes in Hitler's "final victory." Shots ring out from some houses. But a proliferation of white sheets hang in the windows; in cellars, people are already trying to learn Russian, and as the first Soviet soldiers burst into the house, two lines are recited from the *Internationale*, the anthem of socialist internationalism. As the Third Reich tumbles, so does its ideology, like a house of cards. Only a few disturbed youths still place their hopes in the Führer.

Berlin belongs to the victors. Women become prey for the Soviet soldiers. None are safe. The older German men who remain demand the women do nothing that could anger the victors. One of the women who cannot bear the situation kills herself—another is shot. Anonyma records it all in her diary.

First she resists, even challenging a Red Army soldier who is pursuing a woman: "Why do you take a woman who does not want it?" Later she complains to a battalion commander: "It is your duty to help!" But he tolerates the assaults. Then, like others, she seeks out a lover, a protector, an officer—"the higher the better." The gentlemen are received in the

apartment of a pharmacist's widow, home to a community of those whose homes have been bombed out. The men bring food. A degree of gallows humour is necessary. Nina Hoss convincingly plays the young woman, who pushes her feelings aside, but they are constantly at work within her because the events are simply so powerful.

When she understands the tragedy that each individual soldier has experienced, including her protector—the battalion commander, who lost his wife to German soldiers, and who treats her well—she can no longer maintain her initial indignation. When another woman is being hunted down and turns to Anonyma for assistance as she speaks Russian, she remains mute.

The film strives to defend the Red Army against both old and new right-wing, anticommunist propaganda about the "beasts" from the East. This is done by portraying the soldiers as human individuals who have experienced terrible things at the hands of the Nazis—just simple farmers, cowherds, bookkeepers, who want to return home as quickly as possible to their destroyed villages, to their destroyed families. The Red Army is also not simply "the Russians." There are, of course, Ukrainians, Russians and men from the Caucasus, Mongols—all getting along together—a situation quite different from today with the collapse of the Soviet Union into small nationalist fragments.

The characterisation of the army is nevertheless superficial. The soldiers do not represent a specific historical epoch. They could have come from another war. The rapes are explained from the standpoint of general human motives, particularly that of revenge. One of the specific aspects of this war, however, is that the Soviet Union was regarded as the first workers' state, a worldwide representative of socialism. Why did rapes take place, which could only discredit socialism? At one moment the camera seems to linger questioningly on the flag of the Soviet Union.

## Stalin's crimes against the Red Army

The Red Army of 1945 was not the same organisation that had successfully defended the socialist revolution in the civil war a quarter-century earlier. The victors, who conquered Hitler, had not only been through the atrocities of fascism, but in the years before also experienced the hell of Stalin's purges. Surprisingly, there is no mention of this in a film that touches on many different questions.

In 1937, the popular Red Army leader Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky [1] stood accused of seeking to overthrow Stalin in order to install a pro-German government. He allegedly did this at the behest of Leon Trotsky—at that point in exile—and for the German general staff. The "proof" of "espionage" was a network of plots involving the Nazis and the Czechoslovak government.

In his book *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror* (2), historian Vadim Rogovin

describes how the Nazis, seeing through Stalin's real aims, were pleased by the turn of events. The notorious leader of the German security apparatus, Reinhard Heydrich, stated, "Even if Stalin simply wants to mislead us, I will supply Uncle Joe in the Kremlin with sufficient proof, so that his lies are the absolute truth." Swift executions followed the secret trial of the generals with accompanying purges throughout the army.

This was preceded by longer conflicts over the defence capability of the army. Stalin and Defence Minister Kliment Voroshilov,[3] certainly not the military geniuses portrayed in later propaganda, strongly resisted modernising the Soviet military in 1930. Although they later changed their position, Tukhachevsky was condemned in the 1937 trial for "sabotage." Voroshilov and Stalin believed there was no danger of war for the USSR. In their eyes, future war in Europe, which could expand into the territory of the USSR, was impossible. Tukhachevsky and the others agreed that the future existence of the Soviet Union should not be placed in danger by Stalin and Voroshilov.

At this time, the entire Soviet state was in ferment. The social gulf between rich and poor had deepened over the years. The more unpopular Stalin became among ordinary people, the more he sought to stabilise his support among wealthy layers, which he helped to create through a deliberate and systematic distribution of privileges. Among those who felt dissatisfied were many soldiers, whose families in many cases, were simple peasants who had suffered terribly from Stalin's false policy of enforced collectivization. The generals of the Red Army were experienced Bolsheviks, who had fought for Soviet power in the civil war. Most commanders also fought in the civil war. The army leadership enjoyed great authority in the population and many looked to them with hope to stop the growing repression.

Parallel to his objective of preventing a future revolt of the underprivileged, which would mean the end for him, Stalin sought to use foreign policy to strengthen his rule, looking in particular to the German bourgeoisie. Apart from his military and political incompetence, this was the most important reason for Stalin's underestimation of German rearmament and the real dangers of war. In 1939, he signed a nonaggression treaty with Hitler.

Historians are largely agreed that there were no orders from above in 1945 to conduct mass rape. During Trotsky's time, feelings of revenge, although understandable, were not tolerated. In his book *The Party of the Executed*, Rogovin stresses, "It was the Bolsheviks, and above all Trotsky as leader of the Red Army, who put a merciless stop to the excesses of the civil war." For instance, in a document outlining the principles of leadership published after the Cossack rebellion in the Don region, Trotsky wrote: "We explain to the Cossacks in words and show them in deeds that our politics are not the politics of revenge ... We strictly ensure that the advancing army does not carry out acts of theft, violence etc."

Within the bounds of possibility, Trotsky had always sought to make the needs of ordinary people the starting point for his politics, to encourage their self-confidence, to strengthen their power. Through the introduction of democracy into the army, the ordinary soldier had substantial influence.

On the other hand, Stalin relied on a different social layer, which was also expressed in his dishonest propaganda—that ordinary Germans stood "blindly" behind Hitler and were equally responsible for the crimes of fascism. This accusation of "collective guilt" not only encouraged feelings of contempt (how much of this contempt was embodied in each rape?), but also justified the later political suppression of the working class in the Soviet occupied zone and in East Germany. Fraternalisation was not on the agenda.

A film that considered the devastating impact of Stalinism on the Red Army, the destruction of its culture and its democratic traditions and the brutalized character of the population would not find such difficulty in condemning the mass rapes of 1945. Färberböck's film only defends the "immoral" survival strategy of Anonyma and the other women who use

every means to try and survive. The suspicion arises that Anonyma's healthy indignation—in relation to the rapes—is only a product of her ability to blank out unpleasant realities. When a young soldier describes excitedly how German soldiers had killed children in a village in the most brutal manner, she wonders whether he only heard about it from others or had experienced it himself.

There is a scene where one senses that this ability to feel like a fish in water had already helped her in the Third Reich. In the apartment of the pharmacist's widow, she displays her old arrogance and makes merry about the primitive Russians. This provides a small moment of insight. Overall however, Anonyma, who moves through the film at times like an unapproachable spirit, embodies less a living person of that period than a timeless psychological phenomenon.

The main accused in the film is war. All sides lose their humanity. Or, as Anonyma puts it, "War changes the words, and love is no longer what it was." Put so broadly, this truth makes no sense.

The film has some quite moving moments. Such as when Anonyma says goodbye to the battalion commander, and tells him she is grateful to have known him. He is an exceptional person—because he refuses to shoot her—even though soldiers arrest a young man with a pistol and hand grenade in her apartment. He is "transferred to a place unknown," as the official order reads. He knows what that means—detention in Siberia or the death penalty. Unfortunately, here too the film offers only a general human motive—love.

Over all, *Anonyma* is a missed opportunity to present a living history.

#### Notes:

1. Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky, marshal of the Red Army, joined the Bolshevik party in 1918 and played an important role in the civil war, starting from 1919. He was chief of staff of the Red Army until 1928 and in 1936 was still deputy minister of defence of the Soviet Union. In 1937 he was accused of "leading anti-soviet and Trotskyist organisations in the Red Army" and of "espionage for the German Reich," condemned to death in the fourth Moscow trial along with other prominent generals and was shot on June 12, 1937. His trial served as the prelude to Stalin's comprehensive purge of the Red Army.

2. Vadim S. Rogovin, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror; The Party of the Executed*, Mehring Books, Oak Park, Michigan, 1998.

3. Kliment J. Voroshilov, commander in chief of the 10<sup>th</sup> army during the Russian civil war—like Stalin—was negatively conspicuous for arbitrary actions and lack of discipline. Voroshilov was marshal of the Red Army from 1935 and People's Commissar for Military and Navy Affairs from 1925 to 1934. Due to his incompetence in the first stages of World War II, he was dismissed as commander of Soviet forces in 1940. He was Stalin's close confidante during the political purges. Despite numerous military failures he remained in Stalin's favour and was a deputy chairman of the council of people's commissars until Stalin's death in 1953. He was head of state of the USSR from 1953 to 1960.



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