64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

Political agendas at this year's Berlinale

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This is the first of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014.

A notable feature of the 64th Berlin Film Festival (Berlinale) was the manner in which certain leading figures in the film world openly promoted their retrograde political agendas.

Film star George Clooney was in town to advertise his latest effort, *The Monuments Men*, which he directed and features in. The film has been already been reviewed on the WSWS.

While in Berlin, during a press conference for his new film, Clooney made a point of appealing for support for the right-wing parties currently leading the violent protests in Ukraine. The American actor-director noted that his relationship with the Klitschko brothers (boxer Vitali Klitschko heads the right-wing Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform [UDAR] party) went back to their collaboration on *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), in which Wladimir Klitschko, also a boxer, played a part.

Clooney expressed his support for the imprisoned oligarch Yulia Tymoshenko—an individual widely despised and identified as a criminal by Ukrainians. Clooney then expressed sympathy for the protesters in Kiev who were "having a difficult time". Repeating the newspeak of the US State Department, Clooney dismissed the leading role played in the demonstrations by the ultra-right Svoboda Party and the fascist goons of the Right Sector group as merely the activity of "some hooligans".

Clooney seemed impervious to the irony involved in his promotion of semi-fascist and anti-Semitic forces in Kiev at a press conference devoted to *The Monuments Men*, which depicts, albeit in a highly unsatisfactory way, the attempt by a special US army unit to rescue works of art from the Nazis toward the end of World War II.

Part of the problem is certainly the dismissive attitude toward a serious study of history exhibited by many contemporary artists, including Clooney. At one point in his new film, Clooney declares in a voiceover that the greatest crime one can do to a people is destroy their history and achievements, leaving them "as if they never existed". Unfortunately, Clooney himself demonstrates a cavalier and superficial approach to history, which accounts in part for the many clichéd scenes in *The Monuments Men* and his failure to develop characters in a way that might more seriously engage an audience.

More concretely, a number of Clooney's recent engagements have closely jibed with official US government operations.

The actor makes a brief appearance in a fine documentary film featured at the Berlinale, Hubert Sauper's *We Come as Friends*, which deals with the background and disastrous consequences of the recent division of Sudan into two separate states. (That film will be reviewed separately.) Clooney features in *We Come as Friends* as a firm advocate of the policy of the US State Department, i.e., as a supporter of Sudan's break-up. To this end, the film star has campaigned vigorously for imperialist (United Nations) forces to intervene in the country on the basis of a "robust mandate".

The propaganda value of Clooney's latest film for the American establishment was not lost on *Der Spiegel*, the German weekly news magazine. In its piece on *The Monuments Men*, the magazine commented: "His [Clooney's] film seems more like a nostalgic postcard addressed to the America of today—a country that has mostly distinguished itself in recent decades by dirty wars from Vietnam to Iraq. Unlike napalm, drones and the massacre of civilians, the *Monuments Men* are a pillar of decency".

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Ken Loach in Berlin

Also present in Berlin was veteran British film director Ken Loach, who was honored at the festival for his lifetime achievement. The organisers highlighted what they called Loach's "profound interest in people and their individual fates as well as his critical commitment to society". Ten of Loach's films, some dating back to the 1960s, were screened during the course of the festival.

The WSWS has written at length about the significance, as well as the contradictions, of Loach's work, while making clear our irrevocable differences with his most recent political venture, the attempt to rally various pseudo-radical groups into the "Left Unity" organization he recently helped to found in Britain.

A year ago in a comment on his most recent film, *The Spirit of '45* (2013), I wrote: "In a career that now spans nearly fifty years, Loach has deservedly won a reputation as a filmmaker concerned with the fate of the working class. He is one of the very few. It is difficult to think of another director who has so consistently sought to portray the lives and problems of ordinary people. Against the trend of most modern filmmaking, which ignores the working population altogether, or depicts it as passive or backward, Loach presents workers as real human beings and as an active social force".

The review continued: "*The Spirit of '45*, however, reveals the limitations of his approach. Loach's conception of the working class is closely bound up with the nationalist straitjacket imposed for so many decades by the Labor and trade union bureaucracy".

Loach used his appearance at the Berlin festival to promote his new party's pro-capitalist program. At the award ceremony, for example, he told his audience: "I think we do live in darkening times, it is sometimes difficult to remember this". Echoing the call of the European trade union bureaucracy for a "social Europe"—i.e., a platform on which the unions commit themselves to help implement austerity policies across the continent—Loach continued, "I don't know about you, but I think we do need a united Europe, we are in it together, we are Europeans and we have to find common cause". Any number of right and "left" politicians, ex-Stalinists, union officials and others would find nothing to object to in this comment.

The following day, Loach was the main speaker at a meeting held at Berlin's House of Democracy under the banner of "The Crisis in Europe and the Reformation of the Radical Left". In his speech to an audience drawn primarily from the pseudo-left organisations, Loach recalled how he had been attracted to Trotskyism in the 1960s. Since that time, however, he continued, he had learnt his lesson and now rejected the Trotskyist program as "sectarian." On this unprincipled basis, the filmmaker seeks to generate illusions in the discredited trade union and labour bureaucracies, thereby creating a new political trap for the working class.

A fresh viewing of some of Loach's early works, especially *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Kes* (1969) , with their piercing look at British social life in the 1960s, is a salutary reminder of the fact that many outstanding British artists and filmmakers, including Tony Garnett, Roy Battersby, David Mercer, Jim Allen, Loach and others, fiercely rejected the soup kitchen politics of social democracy and the trade union bureaucracy in favor of the program of Trotskyism and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

Clooney and Loach, both talented individuals, belong to different generations, and have quite different histories. Clooney, from a show business family, has never been much more than a well-meaning, garden variety American liberal, while Loach had contact with the revolutionary socialist movement decades ago. Nonetheless, their coming together in defense of existing institutions and in line with various official political operations is symptomatic of some of the difficulties in the present cultural situation.

Additional articles will deal with some of the most interesting films on show at this year's Berlin festival.

To be continued

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