64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

We Come as Friends and *Run Boy Run*: Two more films that take a serious approach

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This is the third of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014. Part *1 was posted February 20 and* Part 2 *February 24.*

We Come as Friends

The documentary film *We Come as Friends* opens with one of its very few lighthearted scenes.

Standing in the cockpit of his self-designed and very frail-looking airplane, director Hubert Sauper is trying to explain to an African military officer the significance of the tiny music box attached to the dashboard. The soldier is convinced that when the handle is turned the music box plays a lullaby. Sauper explains that, in fact, the music box is playing the *Internationale*, an important song of international workers' solidarity. Unable to comprehend such a concept, the soldier insists that, no, it is a song for infants.

Sauper's *We Come as Friends* deals with the consequences of Western imperialist policy in Sudan, and Africa as a whole. The focus is on the recent division of the Sudan that occurred in 2011. The strength of the film lies in the way this event is placed in the context of Western colonial ambitions in Africa going back more than a century.

We see a train moving from south to north, traversing the savannah and carving the land into two halves—divide and conquer, this has been the pattern of Great Power intervention in Africa since the late nineteenth century.

At the start of the film, Sauper's narration makes clear that at the heart of the division of Sudan is the struggle between the US and its allies, on the one side, and China, on the other, over the exploitation of the country's rich natural resources. The film's title refers to the manner in which the powers seeking to exploit Africa invariably come bearing gifts.

All the foreign powers—the British, the French, the Americans and also the Chinese—"only want to help" Africa and the Africans. While Sauper makes clear that China is a major player in Africa, his film concentrates its fire on the Western nations, in particular the US, which have a long history of exploitation of the continent.

We see footage of former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton warning of the dangers of a round of "new colonialism in Africa", which will only benefit businessmen. In fact, what Clinton objects to is the threat of Chinese businesses profiting rather than American ones. Actor George Clooney also makes a brief appearance on one of his "good-will" missions to Africa. In line with the policy of the Obama administration, Clooney was a passionate advocate of Sudan's division.

The Austrian-born Sauper (*Darwin's Nightmare*, 2004) traces the colonial exploitation of Africa back to the Berlin conference held in 1884-1885. At the conference, the various European powers and the US sought to lay down some ground rules for their "Scramble for Africa".

The documentary features a number of perceptive interviews with victims of this policy, ordinary Africans, who lament that in turn the US, Britain and France support one gangster, or band of gangsters, after another. If anyone emerges who is genuinely prepared to aid Africans, "then they are killed in a plane crash".

A local resident is being hounded by his countrymen for a deal he made with the Dallas-based Nile Trading and Development company. For a mere $25,000, he signed over the rights to 600,000 square acres of land. While Western companies make fantastic profits in Sudan, the inhabitants of the country are condemned (once again) to poverty and backwardness by powers intent on milking the country dry. Sauper interviews members of one community who have been pushed off their land in this process and forced to erect shanty homes over a graveyard.

There are many scenes in the film that linger in the memory. An African politician tries to drum up enthusiasm for the division of the country by standing up (in the course of a radio interview) and encouraging listeners to sing the new national anthem of one half of the country. Unfortunately for him, it becomes clear he doesn't know the lyrics of the song.

We witness a meeting of the South Sudan Investment Summit

at which one of the speakers emphasises that the purpose of investment in Sudan is not to exploit the country's inhabitants. Once you grasp this, he insists glowingly, apparently unaware of the irony of his own comments, "You will make big bucks".

Another telling scene focuses on a group of Christian missionaries bringing "civilisation" to the "natives". The missionaries' declared intention is to construct a "New Texas" in the middle of Sudan.

A Christian couple applaud the qualities of ordinary Africans people, but, as one of the pair notes, unfortunately, "they have other ideas about property ownership". When asked if there had been any conflicts with the Africans they were seeking to convert, a female missionary declares, "none at all". She is promptly corrected by her husband, who notes that some villagers had objected to the partition of their land when the missionaries arrived. The missionary instructed them: "You were here first, but now there is a fence, so you will have to get used to it".

The film makes clear that the hypocritical and pernicious role of Christian missionaries has changed little over the course of the last century and a half. What has changed, however, is their technology. In *We Come as Friends*, we see converts receiving solar-powered radio Bibles enabling them to hear the word of God in the remotest of regions.

The final images in the film recall the cost in lives of the succession of wars fought out on African soil and fomented by the Western powers. We witness brutal scenes of combat, shot on a camera phone by a South Sudanese soldier, contrasted with images of wealthy Europeans lounging by the poolside at a newly developed spa.

All in all, Sauper's film is a withering indictment of the reality behind Great Power promises of "humanitarian aid", covering some of the same territory as Raoul Peck's fine documentary *Fatal Assistance* (shown at the Berlinale last year), which dealt with such aid to Haiti.

Run Boy Run

The latest film from German director Pepe Danquart—who won an Oscar in 1994 for his short film *Black Rider*, a caustic look at racism in modern Germany—is *Run Boy Run*, a fiction film based on a best-selling children's novel by Israeli writer Uri Orlev.

Danquart's film takes place in Poland in the middle of the Second World War. The film tracks the trials and tribulations of a young Polish Jewish boy, Srulik Frydman, whose father is killed by German troops in the movie's opening scene. The plot is based on the real-life experiences of Friedman as chronicled by Orlev.

With his dying breath, and with German troops approaching, Srulik's father tells his son, "There's no time. I want you to remember what I'm going to tell you. You have to stay alive. You have to!… The most important thing, Srulik, is to forget your name. Wipe it from your memory…. But…never forget that you're a Jew'".

Srulik (played by Andrzej and Kamil Tkacz) heeds his father's advice, adopts the name Jurek Staniak and commences a life on the run in the Polish countryside. German troops have incarcerated Jews in the Warsaw ghetto and are systematically liquidating any others they find.

Jurek's struggle for survival begins. His closest ally is a young Polish farmwife and mother, Magda (Elisabeth Duda), who takes him in and feeds him. As the Germans close in on her house, she instructs him in the formalities of the Catholic religion. Eventually, if he wants to stay alive, however, he must find other shelter. To do that he must publicly deny his Jewishness and appeal to Polish families for help in the manner of a "good Catholic".

The film concentrates on the incredible hardships Jurek encounters in the wild, and tends to obscure or omit the broader political and historical questions. At one point in the film, we are informed that Soviet troops have halted a short distance before Warsaw, preventing the immediate relief of the ghetto survivors. Stalin ordered the halt, fearing the development of a popular uprising that could also threaten his own regime.

One of the most powerful features of the film is its treatment of ordinary Poles under the Nazi occupation. In the past few years, there has been a heated debate in Poland on the extent of anti-Semitism within the Polish population, during and after the war. The film makes clear that while Jurek encounters anti-Semitism or indifference from some Poles, who slam their doors in his face, he was only able to survive due to the support he received from Poles who took pity on the child, regardless of his roots. The Jewish community totaled 3 million on the eve of World War II, nearly 10 percent of the country's population.

The most vicious anti-Semite in the film is a surgeon who identifies Jurek as a Jew and, consequently, refuses to carry out an operation on the boy's badly injured arm.

Frydman lost most of his family in the Holocaust. He is now 80 years old, lives in Israel and is a grandfather. Danquart has made a moving tribute to his tenacity, as well as the courage of the ordinary Poles prepared to help him, despite the enormous dangers entailed.