

66th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3:

Alone in Berlin—a working class couple opposes the Nazis

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Hans Fallada's novel *Every Man Dies Alone* (published posthumously in 1947), about a Berlin working class couple who issue a call for resistance to the Second World War and to Hitler via the medium of handwritten postcards, has been adapted several times for film and television (in both East and West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s).

Fallada's novel gained renewed attention following its translation into English in 2009. The great success of the book—the translation was a “surprise UK bestseller” in 2010, selling hundreds of thousands of copies—reflects a strong interest in the era of fascism and a craving for truth about history.

The author's aim was not to reconstruct the real case of Otto and Elise Hampel, from Berlin's Wedding district, who were executed in 1943 by the Nazis. Rather he used their remarkable story as the framework of a social portrait of the German capital under Hitler, drawing the picture of many characters from different milieus. Each has his or her own point of view and attitude towards Nazism.

The real-life Hampels have become in the book and film the fictional Otto (Brendan Gleeson) and Anna (Emma Thompson) Quangel. Other characters often come from the petty bourgeoisie, including those who have experienced social decline and deliberately placed themselves at the service of the Nazis.

For example, there is the ruined bar manager Persicke (Uwe Preuss), who got back on his feet thanks to the Nazi Party. Two of his sons are now in the SS [the murderous Nazi paramilitary organization]. His youngest, Baldur (Sammy Scheuritzel), is a candidate for a Napola [National Political Institute of Education], an elite school for young fascist leaders. The son of Eva Kluge (Katrin Pollitt), the post office employee, is also with the SS. When she learns, however, that he has been involved in killing Jewish children at the front, she breaks off all contact. He is no longer her son.

Frau Kluge has long ago kicked out her husband, Enno (Lars Rudolph). He is unable to hold down a job and gambles away his wife's money on the horses. He doesn't want anything to do with politics. But he knows a Jewish doctor who, out of fear,

writes sick notes for anyone who asks for one. Massive speedup has been implemented in the factories. Those who give the impression they are not devoting all their energy to “ultimate victory” (“*Endsieg*”), quickly find themselves clapped in a concentration camp.

The unemployed petty criminal Emil Barkhausen (Rainer Egger), who ruthlessly extorts people and is not afraid of betraying them to the Gestapo, is aware of the causes of the anxiety: “Most people today are afraid, basically everyone, because they're all up to something forbidden, one way or another, and are worried that someone will get wind of it”. After Otto Quangel learns of his son's death and expresses his grief to Barkhausen, the latter immediately tries to extort him, using the threat of the camps.

Fallada's nuanced picture of daily life in the Third Reich shows the falsity of the thesis of Daniel Goldhagen and his supporters, holding that all Germans uniformly supported Hitler and the extermination of the Jews. The latest remake of *Alone in Berlin* (directed by Swiss actor Vincent Pérez) also rejects a collective guilt thesis. “I wanted to present this fear which was omnipresent. It was so thick you could cut it with a knife”, the director said.

Gestapo inspector Escherich (Daniel Brühl) takes his time finding out who is behind the amateurishly written postcards with their anti-Hitler slogans. He is convinced the postcards will not be passed on. Everyone will report them to the police—out of fear, rather than loyalty to the Führer. The guillotine stands out symbolically toward the end of the film (the Hampels were beheaded). The following scene shows a tenement building with countless empty windows.

In the novel, this fear has a pre-history. Almost every adult in the Weimar Republic period (1919-33) had contact with people who were later regarded as “enemies of the people” under the Nazi regime. The German Communist Party (KPD) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) were parties with millions of members and sympathisers: workers, artisans, intellectuals, journalists and artists, including many Jews. Jews could be found in all social circles. Virtually every adult was vulnerable to official persecution at some point in the Nazi period, if one only dug

deep enough into his or her past.

The scene in Fallada's book between the prominent film actor and his lawyer is telling. The actor is thankful that he can continue performing under Hitler despite the fact his previous directors were often Jewish. He had also acted in pacifist films. The lawyer is an old school friend. When the movie star finds one of the Quangels' postcards in the hallway and shows it to the lawyer, distrust suddenly arises. Each fears the other has laid a trap. They give the postcards to a Nazi functionary and their anger is now directed against those who wrote the anti-Hitler messages.

This concrete social mechanism of terror and the realism and sophistication of the novel in general are missing from the film. It focuses entirely on the couple, the Quangels, well performed by Gleeson and Thompson. The environment recedes into the background, is sterile and resembles a stage set. Many important episodes in the novel are missing. Characters have been deleted or smoothed over. The KPD underground resistance, in the environs of which Fallada locates some of his characters, has been carefully removed from the film.

Persicke's telling history is presented in a positively false light. His glorification of the Führer in the book is accompanied by a profound social contempt for all those weaker than he is. The figure of Baldur also jars in the film. Perez turns the fanatical Hitler Youth leader into a fairly harmless young person in a youth organisation uniform, who is embarrassed when the elderly, Jewish Frau Rosenthal (Monique Chaumette) reminds him that as a child he always liked to eat her cakes.

The character of Escherich is interesting. One can imagine him as a criminologist during the Weimar Republic. Fallada leaves no doubt that his social indifference, his hunter's nature was decisive for his Nazi career. Emotionless and with perseverance, he chases his "game", the unknown postcard writer.

In Pérez's film version, the cynical Gestapo officer, feared on all sides, is turned into a victim of violence. Only out of fear of his brutal superiors does he act violently. Before he takes desperate action, he throws the Quangels' postcards out the open window of his office. Do the postcards fluttering outside, an image with which the film closes (the scene does not exist in the novel), indicate a twinge of conscience on Escherich's part?

Each previous adaptation of the Fallada novel inevitably reflected a certain *Zeitgeist* [spirit of the time]. In the 1975 West German film (directed by Alfred Vohrer), Anna was the stronger character and the initiator of the postcards protest, in the spirit of the women's movement of the day. The detailed five-hour, three-part television miniseries made in 1970 in East Germany (Hans-Joachim Kasprzik) made concessions to the Stalinist state censor. Otto Quangel was depicted as politically immature because he did not join the political opposition of the Stalinist Communist Party but instead acted as an apolitical loner.

The new Franco-German production appears at a time when far-right movements such as the National Front in France and Pegida and Alternative for Germany are on the rise and state violence increasingly dominates everyday life. Undoubtedly, the film is a concerned response. Today's youth should know the history of the Quangels, argues leading actor Daniel Brühl. At the same time, we are witnessing today an enormous intensification of social inequality.

Among the most notable scenes in *Alone in Berlin* is one pointing to economic inequality in the Nazi state: Anna Quangel, a member of the Nazi Women's Association, visits a wealthy "people's comrade" (Katarina Schüttler) in her luxury apartment and asks her, as she would anyone else, to comply with the general obligation to work. The woman is indignant at the arrogance. Her husband, a senior Nazi official, ensures that Anna is dismissed from the Women's Association.

It may sound surprising when Brühl explains that the film is innovative in featuring no die-hard Nazis. In fact, even in Fallada's novel there are no figures corresponding to the usual Nazi stereotypes advocating an irrational "Master Race" and exhibiting the individual, sadistic lust to torture people.

What distinguishes the Nazi youth Baldur Persicke and the other petty-bourgeois characters, whom one could well imagine participating in today's Pegida or the National Front, is the social attitude aptly and ironically described by Leon Trotsky in his brilliant essay "What is National Socialism?", written shortly after the Nazi takeover in 1933: "What must be done in order to improve things? First of all, throttle those who are underneath".

One can sense new social questions and emphases being explored in the film. Perhaps there were many more who thought like the Quangels. But ultimately, unfortunately, Perez' effort to remodel Fallada's realistic and multifaceted novel into a pacifist appeal for individual moral courage fails to convince.



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