

Charité at War: A chilling portrayal of Nazism and its crimes

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All over the world, ruling elites are responding to the heightening of social tensions and widespread opposition to poverty and war by lurching to the right, resorting to police-state methods and reviving the ideological and political filth of the 20th century. In Germany, neo-Nazi activity has become a major political danger.

One of the indispensable duties of artists today is to depict realistically what Nazism was and what it meant for masses of people. Leon Trotsky once commented, “The sole feature of fascism which is not counterfeit is its will to power, subjugation, and plunder. Fascism is a chemically pure distillation of the culture of imperialism.”

In its own way, *Charité at War*, a powerful German television drama currently available on Netflix, gives life to Trotsky’s proposition. The series is set in the years 1943 to 1945 at Berlin’s Charité hospital, one of the most prominent in Europe. Created by Dorothee Schön, directed by Anno Saul and co-written by Schön and Sabine Thor-Wiedemann, the six episodes actually make up the second season of a series devoted to the institution—the first takes place in 1888 and following years.

Inevitably, central to *Charité at War*’s storyline is the crushing impact of the Nazi regime on every aspect of life and the degree to which the various doctors, nurses, staff and family members, a mix of historical and fictional figures, offer either resistance or support to the Hitler dictatorship and its policies.

“How does the Hippocratic Oath square with an oath to the Führer?,” asks one of the characters rhetorically. Viewed by millions in Germany, *Charité at War* is a forthright and chilling appraisal of the fascist poison that seeped into every fiber of German society. It is clearly directed against the contemporary rise of neo-Nazi and far-right elements.

Certain characters and strands of the complex plot stand out. One of the leading doctors at the Charité is Ferdinand Sauerbruch (Ulrich Noethen), a surgeon, an innovator in surgical procedures and prosthetics, who has been at the hospital since 1928. (“I defended [Albert] Einstein, the most hated scientist in the Third Reich.”) Sauerbruch is a German

nationalist and a conservative, but he criticizes the Nazis and their dictates.

In the series, Sauerbruch’s chief adversary is Max de Crinis (Lukas Miko), a psychiatrist, high-ranking SS member and medical expert for the *Aktion T4*, a mass murder program of involuntary euthanasia. As many as 300,000 mentally ill and physically handicapped people were killed under this Nazi program in Germany and Austria, occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia. In his *Mein Kampf* (1924), Adolf Hitler had claimed that racial hygiene would “appear as a deed greater than the most victorious wars of our present bourgeois era.” (Both Sauerbruch and de Crinis were historical figures.)

Anni Waldhausen (Mala Emde), one of de Crinis’s most promising PhD students, is married to Artur (Artjom Gilz), a pediatrician who, unbeknownst to his wife, is testing out medications on disabled children considered disposable by the Nazis.

The duplicitous Artur’s reactionary predilections surface in a lecture he delivers to nurses about being the guardians of genetic material: “Our goal is to increase fertility for good gene holders and to prevent unwanted genetic illnesses.”

Artur describes his work, according to the precepts of Nazi “racial purity” theory, as research into the “sterilization of genetically unsuitable subjects. The genetic value of a person is determined by the tribe and not their looks or health condition. Your information regarding genetic diseases and anti-social elements is the foundation of our tribal registration in determining if the parents of disabled children should be sterilized.”

In a horrible twist of fate, Anni delivers a child, Karin, with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, making the infant a potential victim of the euthanasia program. In the maternity ward, Anni shares a room with Magda Goebbels (Katharina Heyer)—wife of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister—who is suicidal because of a recent miscarriage.

When surreptitious efforts to cure Karin fail, Artur takes action behind Anni’s back. Some of the most tension-filled

moments concern Karin's destiny.

Anni's life is further complicated by the fact that her anti-Nazi brother, Dr. Otto Marquardt (Jannik Schumann), is gay and recently returned from the frontline. He and his lover, nurse Martin Schelling (Jacob Matschenz), must avoid the prying and spying eyes of the vindictive Nazi collaborator, Nurse Christel (Frida-Lovisa Hamann), who is committed to Germany's "ultimate victory."

Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code made homosexual acts between men illegal. The Hitler regime broadened the provision, in the name of defending the "moral health" of the *Volk*, the German people. Nazi persecution included the conviction of some 42,000 homosexuals. Ten thousand gay men were sent to concentration camps, 60 percent of whom did not survive.

One of the most admirable anti-Nazi figures in *Charité at War* is Adolphe Jung (Hans Löw), a French physician (and another real historical figure) forcibly transferred from Occupied France by the German authorities to the Charité. In Episode 2, he informs Sauerbruch that famed German writer Thomas Mann, in a radio broadcast, has revealed that there are deliberate killings at the Charité: "In German hospitals," says Mann, "they put the seriously injured together with the old, frail and mentally ill in order to kill them with nerve gas. ... The regime tells us it's a Christian crusade against the Bolsheviks. It is nothing but genocide and mass murder."

Sauerbruch is skeptical that such horrors could possibly be taking place in his hospital. His physician wife and staunchest defender Margot (Luise Wolfram) tells Jung: "My husband is neither a Nazi nor in the party. He is a doctor not a politician." To which Jung replies firmly: "In these times everything is political."

Margot and Sauerbruch attempt to shield opposition figure Hans von Dohnányi (Max von Pufendorf) from the perfidious de Crinis and the Gestapo, into whose clutches he will eventually fall, resulting in his being sent to a concentration camp and murdered.

In 1945, the end of the Hitler regime draws near. There are more and more air raids as the Soviet army approaches. Berlin, the German capital, is the last stand for the Nazis, who want every doctor and nurse to handle a bazooka. In the end, the Nazi authorities become preoccupied with destroying evidence of their crimes, killing patients and, ultimately, themselves.

When Soviet soldiers enter the hospital, Artur, wearing a yellow star of David given to him by the Jewish father of an injured boy, negotiates their takeover of Charité. He performs the role of a self-sacrificing hero, in part to try and salvage his relationship with Anni. More importantly, he fears being prosecuted as a Nazi collaborator. Interestingly,

one of the Soviet troops identifies Sauerbruch as the physician who treated Lenin's tooth 30 years earlier—in Zurich.

All in all, *Charité at War* makes a consistently honest, convincing effort to present the horrible truth of this historical period. The unbearable pressure exerted by Nazi rule brings out the best and the worst in people. In terms of the latter, every weakness, fear, jealousy, opportunist impulse and desire for authority over others is amplified and can even take a murderous turn.

Artur under "normal" circumstances would be a conventional middle class professional and family man. However, his highly pronounced conformism and unwillingness to stand up against the fascist authorities make him a vessel for the carrying out of genuine atrocities. The series points out that Jewish personnel were all expelled from the hospital in 1933.

The acting is first-rate and committed in *Charité at War*, and the entire project has a sober, serious air to it. One striking visual feature is that many scenes open with actual historical footage then blended into the drama.

The series raises vital issues. The fascist threat arises from the crisis of capitalism. The Nazi regime was the terrible price the German working class paid, thanks to the Social Democratic and Stalinist misleaders who stood at their head, for the failure to overthrow the bourgeois order. Fascism is not a mass movement today, but there can't be the slightest complacency about the dangers.

Fascism, Trotsky wrote, meant the direct dominance of every aspect of society by ruthless finance capital, which "gathers into its hands, as in a vise of steel, directly and immediately, all the organs and institutions of sovereignty, the executive, administrative and educational powers of the state: the entire state apparatus together with the army, the municipalities, the universities, the schools, the press, the trade unions, and the co-operatives." And, one might add, the medical profession and hospitals.

When a state becomes fascist, Trotsky explained, it signifies first of all that the workers' organizations are annihilated, the working class is reduced to an amorphous state, and "a system of administration is created which penetrates deeply into the masses."

Charité at War is not written and directed according to a revolutionary outlook, but its honesty is an antidote to complacency.



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