

# Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life*: An Austrian farmer's lonely defiance of the Nazis

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Terrence Malick's latest film, the tenth in the course of his lengthy career, is in some ways a return in theme and style to earlier work. Like *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *A Hidden Life* deals with the horrors of militarism and war.

The new film also utilizes a more accessible narrative style than recent Malick efforts, as it tells the story of Franz Jägerstätter (1907-1943), an Austrian farmer who refused military service because he would not take the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler. After a brief trial, Jägerstätter was executed in Berlin, less than two years before the defeat and collapse of Hitler's Third Reich.

*A Hidden Life* was inspired by a volume of Jägerstätter's letters and writings from prison, edited by his biographer Erna Putz.

This is promising subject matter for film treatment, and there are moments in which the impact of the Nazi dictatorship on ordinary people, as well as the aptness of this episode from the Second World War in today's political climate, find dramatic expression. It must be said, however, that these are outweighed by the kind of mystical-religious outlook that has infused most of Malick's films, which substitute metaphysical abstraction and supra-historical morality for a concrete examination of social reality. *A Hidden Life*, factually accurate as far as it goes, simply ignores crucial issues raised by the Franz Jägerstätter story.

While it proceeds with the sort of spectacular and at times almost dreamlike cinematography for which Malick is well known, *A Hidden Life* also has occasionally semi-documentary elements. It opens with black-and-white newsreel footage of Hitler, then juxtaposes the images of dictatorship with the idyllic mountain village of St. Radegund, where Jägerstätter (August Diehl) and his wife Franziska (Valerie Pachner) live a seemingly perfect life. Three young daughters join the family in quick succession, and the household also includes Jägerstätter's widowed mother and Franziska's sister. The year is 1939. Austria has been annexed by Hitler the year before, and war has begun with the Nazi invasion of Poland.

It does not take long before the Jägerstätters' serene existence is brutally disrupted. The devoutly Catholic Austrian peasant is increasingly disturbed by the changes that have overtaken his neighbors and the village as a whole. The mayor

has become a militant Nazi, inveighing against foreigners and other imagined threats. Jägerstätter begins to make his feelings known and refuses to return the Nazi salute. Villagers react with fury, and the family is shunned. Neighbors spit at Jägerstätter and his wife when they pass.

After a period of military training, Jägerstätter returns home to a joyful reunion, but the family remains ostracized and threatened. The story then reaches a climax, after Jägerstätter is called up for military service and immediately arrested when he refuses to take the formal oath to the Führer.

Much of what follows is taken up with the drawn-out process leading to Jägerstätter's death. His correspondence with Franziska, read in voice-over, relates part of the story. Before his arrest, he is seen receiving counsel from such figures as his local pastor and later the Catholic bishop in the region. His mother and sister-in-law are anxious and angry over the consequences the family will face owing to Jägerstätter's stubborn refusal to take the oath.

Everyone, with the exception of his wife, urges him to compromise, to give in, in the face of certain death for him and ruin for his family. Jägerstätter is unmoved. After his arrest, and later transport to Tegel prison in Berlin, he also rejects similar advice from his appointed defense counsel. The end comes with the guillotine, on August 9, 1943.

As with other Malick films, *A Hidden Life* is characterized at times by the minimal use of dialogue. Much of it passes quickly, in brief and interrupted conversations, almost as if the viewer is eavesdropping on the "hidden life." The cast of the film is almost entirely German. Jägerstätter and his wife, and occasionally other characters where necessary, speak in English that is very lightly accented, while the background conversation in the village, and the interactions with villagers and later with Nazi officials, occur in German. The unusual combination works, for the most part. The imagery and technique are also impressive, as with other films by Malick.

The strongest element of *A Hidden Life* is its depiction of a man who refuses to go along with the descent into fascist barbarism. It must be said, in a very limited but nonetheless significant way, that the persecution of Jägerstätter calls to mind the vicious treatment to which Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning have been subjected because of their

exposure of imperialist war crimes.

There are also some scenes, including a few interactions with fellow inmates in the Tegel prison yard, that evoke the kind of antiwar feeling effectively depicted in *The Thin Red Line*. On the other side, the outbursts of nationalism and chauvinism, while left quite general in the film, recall the contemporary eruption of fascistic rhetoric and policies, not just in the Trump presidency but also in various countries around the world.

This is very limited, however. For the most part, *A Hidden Life* remains on the amorphous, metaphysical plane that has dominated most of Malick's recent films. Unlike Assange and Manning, Jägerstätter has nothing to say about the concrete political situation. A major theme, left unstated but nonetheless present, is a fear of modernity, of urban life. Rural life is depicted as paradise on earth. Some of the early scenes are absurdly exaggerated. Jägerstätter and his wife inhabit a romantic world of their own. Their family is a perfect one. Franziska is called on for little more than saintly behavior, and Jägerstätter is Christlike in his sacrifice. This is no doubt intentional on the filmmaker's part, contrasting the idyllic hamlet with the spiritual pollution of the city, from which the Nazis have emerged to destroy the peaceful existence of St. Radegund.

The other side of the Christian goodness of the Jägerstätters is the generally sheep-like obedience of their neighbors. Good and evil are abstractly presented, and evil is victorious. The view of the masses of the population is a pessimistic one, seeing them as always susceptible to ignorance and demagoguery.

"You can't change the world," Jägerstätter is told. "What difference would it make?" if he goes to his death, asks another who urges him to surrender. "We all have blood on our hands," a third declares. But Franz is mute. His silence is all the testimony required. He does not say we *don't* all share responsibility, or that we *can* change the world. All he can do is offer himself up as a martyr.

At the same time, the film's title and the final passage in George Eliot's classic novel *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) from which it comes, and which appears on screen at its end, hint at the possibility of a broader and less pessimistic theme. "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs," Eliot wrote. In other words, this kind of life, though not widely known, has led to "the growing good of the world." The key lies not in the relationship between the individual and God, but between the individual and the rest of humanity.

Eliot believed firmly in attempting to "change the world." In the 1840s, she turned away from the evangelical religion of her youth and, as we noted on the WSWS in 2009, began to "read everything, including French writers—such as Rousseau, the utopian socialist Saint-Simon, and the 'scandalous' novelist George Sand—who shocked even some of her new progressive

friends. In March 1848, she [Eliot] welcomed the outbreak of the French Revolution and expressed contempt for the overthrown ruler, Louis-Philippe. She declined to sentimentalize over 'a pampered old man when the earth has its millions of unfed souls and bodies.'"

Eliot eventually translated into English a landmark work, German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*), originally published in 1841. Several decades later, Frederick Engels observed that the work had "placed materialism on the throne again... Nothing exists outside nature and man, and the higher beings our religious fantasies have created are only the fantastic reflection of our own essence."

The realist, socially oriented ideals of Eliot and *Middlemarch* are not effectively dramatized by Malick's film. The reason lies in part in the director's choice of subject, a man who has little to do with the world and simply wants to be left alone. A very different look at the lives of civilians during the Third Reich has appeared in the past year, in the television drama *Charité at War*, available on Netflix. Set in Berlin between 1943 and 1945, the series does not provide an overall analysis of the period, but its characters are concretely engaged in the midst of the devastation of war. The resulting drama is connected to history in a way that *A Hidden Life* is not.

Writing about *Tree of Life* (2011), a weaker film, we noted on the WSWS that Malick had the obvious ability to "capture individual images" and "suggest by intimate and intense visual means various ephemeral mental states," but that the truly innovative filmmaking of our time would "need to join these elements to a far greater awareness of social processes and historical laws and to a far deeper immersion in life, not as a schema, but as it is actually lived."



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