

# World on Fire: Dramas of World War II

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*World on Fire*, written by Peter Bowker and directed by Chanya Button, Thomas Napper, Adam Smith and Andy Wilson, is a World War II drama that first aired in the UK in September 2019—on the eightieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war—and then in the US on PBS in 2020.

The ambitious, sprawling seven-episode series (or its first season) follows characters from five countries and takes place in France, Britain, Germany and Poland. Colored by anti-war and anti-fascist views, it is an admirable effort to trace the carnage of the war through the experience of working class and middle class characters, rather than prime ministers and generals.

The Second World War, the bloodiest conflict in human history, led to some 70 to 85 million deaths and vast, almost unimaginable destruction. As such, how could it not still remain a complex, recurring subject for artistic treatment?

*World on Fire* was generally well received and enjoyed audiences that averaged six million or so viewers per episode in Britain. That it held on to its relatively large viewership is a testament to the fact that Bowker's creation maintains a level of drama, suspense and human interest throughout.

The series opens in 1939 in Manchester, England, at a protest against a rally held by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists and its paramilitary wing, known as the blackshirts. The protesters are the ones arrested by police. Among them are Harry Chase (Jonah Hauer-King), from a family of means, and his working-class girlfriend Lois Bennett (Julia Brown). Neither Harry's uppercrust mother Robina (Lesley Manville)—"I have a soft spot for Mosley"—nor Lois' father Douglas (Sean Bean)—a bus conductor, pacifist and shell-shocked veteran of the Battle of the Somme in World War I—endorse their offspring's relationship, for class reasons.

Harry is soon off to Warsaw where he is a translator for the British Embassy. Lois also joins the war effort, entertaining the troops as a singer, while her brother Tom (Ewan Mitchell) signs up with the British navy rather than go to jail for a petty offense.

On the Polish-German border, US radio reporter Nancy Campbell (Helen Hunt) learns that Hitler's army is preparing a blitzkrieg through Poland. Based in Berlin, her broadcasts are closely monitored by her Nazi minder. Meanwhile, Harry falls in love with Kasia (Zofia Wich?acz), a Polish waitress whose brother and father have joined the resistance. Battle scenes include the courageous, but doomed defense of the post office in Danzig against the German onslaught, during which Kasia's father is murdered.

Harry marries Kasia to get her out of Poland, but the latter tricks him into returning to England not with her, but with her young

brother, Jan (Eryk Biedunkiewicz). Back home, Harry reconnects with Lois, who becomes pregnant, but understandably breaks with him over his relationship with Kasia.

On the war front, Nancy begs her nephew Webster (Brian J Smith) to leave Paris, where he works as a doctor. His lover is Albert (Parker Sawyers), a black jazz saxophonist who is a Nazi target on account of his race, his homosexuality and his "degenerate" music. Paris falls to the German forces in June 1940. In Berlin, Nancy defies Nazi menacing to help her neighbors, the Rosslers, hide their daughter's epilepsy from Hitler's deadly eugenics.

Harry, who enlists, is an officer in France with the British Expeditionary Forces, supervising the digging of foxholes and tank traps. Lois shows up to sing for the troops, but wants nothing to do with Harry, who is torn by his love for two women.

As tens of thousands flee Nazi-invaded Belgium, Harry and his unit head for the last route out of France—the evacuation from Dunkirk. The platoon comes across an ambulance of traumatized, shell-shocked British and French troops, including Senegalese soldiers. Harry takes responsibility for them. He, his men and their charges reach an overwhelmed field hospital run by Webster, and evacuate by sea as the Luftwaffe's bombs rain down.

Finally, now part of the Special Operations Executive, Harry's first mission is to parachute into Poland and intercept a resistance group that has been identified by the Nazis. Kasia, who narrowly escapes the gallows, is one of the resisters.

A second season is in preparation.

Along with its more intimate narratives, *World on Fire* dramatizes a number of critical military conflicts and horrific events in the early stages of World War II. The murderous, aggressive Nazi campaign generates resistance in every quarter, except the poshest. Families are torn apart, countries destroyed, lives and minds are lost, so inhuman is the terror and violence.

*World on Fire* adopts a soberly realistic and serious attitude toward history. That approach already flies in the face of a good deal of contemporary cinema that makes history fit into an ideological schema or agenda and/or simply invents it as it goes along (*Inglourious Basterds*, *The Favourite*, *Wild Nights With Emily*, etc.). The series is effective and intelligently done. It imaginatively and thoughtfully dramatizes the contradictions of human behavior without providing easy moral answers in every instance.

For example, the German factory owner, Rossler, feels obliged to join the Nazi party to divert attention away from his epileptic daughter, a candidate for the euthanasia program. He is a bitter opponent of fascism, but must operate his establishment as if he

were not, for there are Nazis in his workforce. The pressure is acute—psychologically and physically debilitating.

For his part, Harry is not acting badly when he marries his Polish paramour Kasia, even though he also loves Lois. His intention is to save Kasia's life. Also, as much as Douglas does not want to see son Tom return to combat, he refuses, for better or worse, to allow Tom to become a conscientious objector for opportunist reasons, so deep is his commitment to pacifism. Even the upper class Robina begins to soften around the edges and let go of her thoroughgoing snobbery. (Although, in this case, the series might have been made more *politically* pointed if Robina-Manville had remained a fascist sympathizer. In the British ruling elite and upper middle class, there were many who cheered on Hitler's murderous attacks on Jews, Communists and Socialists, and the German invasion of the USSR.)

Most affecting are the scenes of global flight involving people from many nationalities, the young and the old, soldiers and civilians. These are reminiscent of today's mass refugee crisis and the displacement of millions of people on a world scale. Furthermore, the brutalities of war are vividly depicted.

As well, *World on Fire* has clearly been influenced by the contemporary rise of extreme nationalist and fascist forces. Its unusual international scope and the conscious decision to shoot in different locations speaks to that. The mini-series is a less nationally-based examination of the world war than one has generally seen in the past. Moreover, the various protagonists draw the viewer in, their conditions are real, the problems are often life-and-death and at odds with the trivial matters on which so many films pivot today.

"*World on Fire* is a drama about World War II, told from a multinational perspective," said writer Peter Bowker in an interview with *Period Dramas*. "I wanted to write a drama where we invested in a Polish family, a French family, just as much as we emotionally invested in a British one. ...

"I deliberately set out to tell stories that weren't traditional war stories," the screenwriter continued. "I wanted to write about what it was like to be a Senegalese soldier who found himself at Dunkirk. What it was like to be gay in Paris, when you'd escaped to Paris to celebrate your sexuality and then the Nazis invaded. What it was like to be a conscientious objector with two children.

"What it was like to be an ordinary apolitical German family, who just hoped Nazism might be a passing phase and who had a child that was at risk because she had a disability.

"They struck me," he said, "as stories that have remained largely untold, but also struck me as contemporary in our current preoccupations with nationality and borders and refugees, and what constitutes a genuine refugee and what constitutes genuine need."

Bowker added, "I read a lot about the euthanasia programme that the Nazis put into place. It started about ten months before the war. Initially, it was directed at adults with long-term mental health problems and severe disabilities. It extended fairly quickly to the monitoring of newborns and children with disabilities. Essentially it was a dry run for the Holocaust."

These are all legitimate and even commendable concerns or ambitions.

While there is an innovative element to Bowker's global, humane and anti-war viewpoint and framework, *World on Fire*'s general approach to the historical traumas of the 20th century is relatively conventional, conforming uncritically to the official view of World War II as a monumental fight for democracy against fascism.

This has significance under conditions in which the grave threats of world war and fascism have re-emerged. *World on Fire* suggests legitimate horror at their re-emergence, but sheds little light on why such phenomena developed in the 1930s and why they are developing today. The origins of fascism are never considered in the series. Hitlerism might simply be some natural disaster that befell humanity, rather than the outgrowth of the crisis-ridden capitalist system. The same can be said for the war itself.

The series' ideological conventionality helps explain why it accepts a superficial, anti-communist reading of the Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939. The incursion was reactionary and characteristic of the Stalinist regime, which by that time had betrayed every basic principle of socialism and internationalism, but *World on Fire* takes the opportunity to imply that Nazi Germany and the USSR were merely two versions of totalitarianism and equally mortal enemies of the Polish people. This is made explicit in a scene in which two Polish resistance fighters are fleeing Soviet forces. One says: "I thought the Russians hated the Germans." The other replies: "They do, but they hate us Poles even more."

Overall, however, taking into account its defects and blind spots, *World on Fire* offers a rational and intriguing orientation toward titanic historical events, which, one hopes, will only encourage the viewer to look more searchingly into the upheavals of the past century.



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