

Transatlantic: The plight of artists and intellectuals fleeing the Nazis in 1940

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Transatlantic, inspired by Julie Orringer’s novel *The Flight Portfolio* and co-created by Daniel Hendler (*Margin Call*) and Anna Winger (*Unorthodox*), is a seven-part series on Netflix. It effectively and movingly recreates the activities of the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) as it operated in 1940 from Marseille, after the fall of France. In May 1940, Hitler’s forces invaded France, defeated the country’s army and, following an armistice signed June 22, occupied a large portion of its territory. The remaining part was nominally controlled by the so-called Vichy regime headed by the fascist collaborator Marshal Philippe Pétain.

Marseille, the only major French port city not directly ruled by the Nazi regime, became the primary route for left-wing and Jewish refugees to escape the Gestapo. The series, directed by Stéphanie Chuat, Véronique Reymond and Mia Maariel Meyer, concentrates on the efforts of American liberal journalist Varian Fry (Cory Michael Smith) to obtain exit visas for the thousands of desperate enemies of the Third Reich.

Transatlantic opens with a radio newscast: “And now the news from Europe. With British forces withdrawn from the continent, the Nazis presently command the English Channel, the Atlantic coast and the north of France, forcing multitudes to flee Paris for the unoccupied zone in the south. The last free port of Marseille teems with refugees from all over Europe, desperately seeking travel visas and funds to depart for the new world.”

In Marseille, ERC operatives Varian and Mary Jayne Gold (Gillian Jacobs), an heiress from Chicago who is the financial lifeline of the Committee, find little aid or cooperation from the American Consul General Graham Patterson (Corey Stoll). Varian: “Innocent people’s lives are being ruined, Mr. Patterson. They’re being wrongfully incarcerated. Even killed. Last week, two more people on my list committed suicide. These refugees need help, and no one else is lifting a finger.”

Siblings Albert (Lucas Englander) and Ursula Hirschman (Morgane Ferru) are among the refugees. After an initial escape attempt by sea fails, the refugees are led by Lisa Fittko (Deleila Piasko) through the Pyrenees mountains into Spain. While Ursula continues on to safety, Albert and Lisa return to Marseille to inform Mary Jayne and Varian about the route. Mary Jayne’s father disinherits her, threatening the ERC’s funding.

Furthermore, Article 19 of the Franco-German armistice is being implemented, which stipulates that all German refugees on French soil must be surrendered on demand to the Nazis.

Despite the enormous dangers, US Consul Patterson is not sympathetic: “No pinkos, no British POWs, no Jews. Do I have to spell it out for you?” The ERC’s headquarters and lodgings, the Hotel Splendide, is raided by the police, but Varian’s once and future lover, Thomas Lovegrove (Amit Rahav), obtains the expansive Villa Air-Bel.

One of the most remarkable collections of political and cultural figures ever assembled, reduced by the defeats of the working class to a wretched condition, is gathered in Marseille.

The refugee luminaries include Surrealist and supporter of Trotsky, André Breton (Louis-Do de Lencquesaing); Surrealist painter Max Ernst

(Alexander Fehling); prominent German satirical author Walter Mehring (Jonas Nay); German political philosopher Hannah Arendt (Alexa Karolinski); Russian revolutionary, historian and novelist Victor Serge (Emmanuel Salinger); and wealthy American art collector and socialite Peggy Guggenheim (Jodhi May). Among the others helped by Fry were Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, Heinrich Mann, Bohuslav Martin?, Arthur Koestler, Siegfried Kracauer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Anna Seghers, Franz Werfel, Jean Malaquais, Jacques Lipchitz and Max Ophüls!

The deplorable state of the artistic refugees bore out the warning of the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” co-authored by Trotsky and Breton in 1938, that “never has civilization been menaced so seriously as today.” It substantiated Trotsky’s own comment, in the same year, that art was “the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected.”

As the drama unfolds, Lisa shepherds a group of refugees, including German literary critic and essayist Walter Benjamin (Moritz Bleibtreu), through the secret mountain pass to Spain. Tragically, Benjamin commits suicide in Portbou in Catalonia, believing he is about to be deported back to France and the Nazis.

According to Vice Consul Hiram Bingham (Luke Thompson), anti-immigrant sentiment is growing in the US, and Mary Jayne starts collaborating with British Intelligence in order to obtain funds for the ERC.

Another radio announcement: “In England, the city of Coventry is burning. Since August, the Luftwaffe have dropped 200 tons of bombs there, murdering hundreds of people and injuring many more. The Germans raided again last night, knocking out utilities and setting the city on fire.”

The filthy Patterson applauds the Nazis: “Fascists in Italy, Spain, Germany, now most of France. This is the new world order. Us and them. Democracy and fascism. Two superpowers. It’s not like they’re Communists. At least they still believe in free enterprise. Henry Ford sold over 60,000 Model Cs in Germany in the last five years. We have to work with these people.”

Patterson gets involved with an executive from a company called ACM, who shows the US official punch cards and explains that they contain data from “last year’s US census, but we can customize it to any client’s needs. Data. ... Age, race, income, marital status. ACM provides the technology. We don’t tell them how to use it. The data serves to organize people into groups. Track migration. Predict behavior.”

As the *Hollywood Progressive* points out, the “fictional ACM resembles the real-life IBM. In his *IBM and the Holocaust*, Edwin Black writes ‘Jews could not hide from millions of punch cards [produced by an IBM subsidiary in Germany] comparing names across generations, address changes across regions, family trees and personal data across unending registries.’ ... Black concludes that ‘IBM placed its technology at the disposal of Hitler’s program of Jewish destruction and territorial domination.’”

(In a 2001 review of Black's book, the WSWS wrote: "Black that ultimately, IBM helped the Nazis carry through their policy of genocide. ... IBM's machines were used at all stages of the persecution of the Jews. They collected the necessary information to identify the Nazis' victims, first to enforce the bar on Jews working in certain academic, professional and government jobs and later to carry out mass evictions from their homes and into the ghettos. IBM technology was used to organize the railways, so that millions of Nazi victims could be transported to the concentration camps, where they were immediately led into the gas chambers.")

Mary Jayne and Thomas hatch a plot to get British POWs out of a French prison as Hotel Splendide concierges, African brothers Paul (Ralph Amoussou) and "Petit" Kandjo (Birane Ba) launch a resistance cell. The radio announces that the Nazis continue their virtually unopposed march across the continent, while "Americans march to the polls. If reelected for an unprecedented third term in office, President Roosevelt promises to stay neutral, but Republican candidate Wendell Willkie insists his opponent is secretly planning to take the United States to war."

A satirical tune is introduced at the villa, which begins "The Führer paints a landscape full of blood ... With his eraser, he deletes all Jews / But his brush is as small as a tiny mouse ..."

When Pétain and his fascist colleagues pay a visit to Marseille, both the refugees and the ERC members are incarcerated on a ship docked in the harbor, the *SS Sinaia*. (Mark Polizzotti's *Revolution of the Mind*, a biography of Breton, notes that the Surrealist leader and Fry "were put with other men into the ship's hold, where the American encountered (to the refugees' worried amusement) many of those he was trying to help.")

Soon after their release from the ship, Varian and Mary Jayne learn that the Pyrenees route has been compromised because British POWs were caught carrying a map that Mary Jayne provided. Roosevelt wins his third term in office.

Varian convinces Vice Consul Bingham to disobey orders and obtain travel documents for the refugees. The latter dodges Patterson's secretary, who is a Gestapo spy. Thanks to the ERC, 257 refugees escape to Martinique.

As get-aways from France are blocked, Marc and Bella Chagall (Gera Sandler and Ronit Asheri) finally decide to flee Marseille. They are accompanied by Varian to the US.

Transatlantic's post-titles inform us that "between 1933 and 1945, more than six million Jews and other 'undesirables' were systematically murdered by the Nazis regime and its collaborators in Europe.

"Between 1940 and 1941, Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee helped more than 2,000 victims of the Nazi regime to safety across the Atlantic.

"Armed resistance to the Nazi occupation began in early 1941 supported by Africans from the colonies, and immigrants all over Europe..."

Creator of *Transatlantic*, Anna Winger, told the *Times of Israel* that "I thought a lot about the fact that people like us—artists, Jews, both—had to leave Berlin as refugees, but now there were so many people coming to Berlin as refugees." Then, just as she started filming *Transatlantic* on location in Marseille, a new war broke out in Europe.

"The war in Ukraine started three days into the production, and there was a whole other wave of refugees coming to Berlin," she said. "Suddenly we were making it in another refugee crisis." In Berlin, she saw thousands of refugees crowding into the central train station, some without shoes, food or plans for shelter. "I think it gave us all a strong sense of purpose," said Winger.

Transatlantic is well scripted, well acted and well done overall. It conscientiously organizes and constructs a remarkable, complex drama.

The creators have chosen to set a story of determined opposition to cruelty and authoritarianism at one of the most tragic moments in history.

Transatlantic brings out some of the worst in humanity and some of its best. It reveals treachery, cowardice and political baseness, as well as courage and self-sacrifice.

Stoll as Patterson is particularly menacing and personifies the sympathetic response of considerable sections of the ruling elite in Europe and America to the rise of Nazism. The actions of Fry and Gold and their colleagues, on the other hand, speak to the fair-minded and democratic instincts of wide layers of the population. Smith as Fry and Jacobs as Gold propel the tense drama forward with the support of an outstanding cast.

Having paid tribute to the series' real and important strengths, it is only fair to indicate such weaknesses as it has. *Transatlantic* suffers from some of the same problems as so many other contemporary works.

It lacks in-depth historical context, a broader grasp of the epoch. The absence of an awareness, or even an intuition, about the specific problems of the era results in a certain blandness in the characterizations of this extraordinary group of human beings. Serge, Breton and others are not made to stand out as they ought to because the filmmakers themselves are not clear about their significance.

Furthermore, how did these people end up in this wretched condition? Was the rise of fascism and the disaster in France akin to an unavoidable natural disaster, like an earthquake?

In fact, the overthrow of French capitalism was entirely possible in this era, but the policy of the Stalinist Communist Party was consciously directed against the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class. Stalin feared that the victory of the working class, especially in Western Europe, would rekindle the revolutionary movement of the Soviet working class. In 1936-38, the Stalinists helped strangle a revolutionary situation in France, which was touched off by a general strike in June 1936. The Popular Front regime supported by the French Communist Party demoralized the working class and cleared the path for the capitulation of the French bourgeoisie to Hitler in June 1940.

Similarly, Orringer's book is conscientious but limited. It does take note, however inadequately, of the complex relationship between Serge, Breton and Trotsky. Moreover, in a dark situation, Varian instigates a little levity: "I hate to provide the voice of reason ... but what are you planning to feed a dozen surrealists? Or does a surrealist dinner party not require actual food?"

Victor Serge can have the last word. In his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1951), he writes: "If it had not been for Varian Fry's American Relief Committee, a goodly number of refugees would have had no reasonable course open to them but to jump into the sea from the height of the transporter-bridge, a certain enough method.

"Those with the most scars take the shock best. These are the young revolutionary workers or semi-intellectuals who have passed through countless prisons and concentration-camps. They are difficult to rescue, because nobody knows them, because the old conformist parties have no sympathy for them, because the governments of the New World are afraid of them (subversives...), because they possess nothing, and because every police force is out to catch them."



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