

The 74th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

From Hilde, With Love: Resistance to fascism then and now

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One of the outstanding films at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) was *From Hilde, With Love*, the new film by veteran German director Andreas Dresen (*Nightshapes, Grill Point, Summer in Berlin, As We Were Dreaming, Gundermann*). The film will have a theatrical release in Germany in October.

The film's title refers to the last words of the young resistance fighter Hilde Coppi to her mother before she was guillotined by the Nazis on August 5, 1943. Before her execution, Hilde, part of the Berlin group of the "Red Orchestra" resistance group, also had to say farewell to her baby, to whom she had given birth in prison. (Remarkably, according to *Variety*, "He is alive today and was consulted about the production.")

The film genuinely gets under one's skin, and journalists applauded at the end of its press screening at the Berlinale. Dresen's film shows in an extremely realistic way how Hilde, together with twelve other young women sentenced to death, awaits her execution, which is then carried out at breakneck speed. One by one, the young women are called up and beheaded. You can palpably feel their fear and despair. When the lights came on in the cinema, there was a moment of shocked silence. Then applause broke out in tribute to the courage and bravery shown by the young victims in their fight against war and fascist terror.

One of the prisoners was 19-year-old Liane Berkowitz. She was pregnant at the time of her arrest and forced to give up her baby before her execution, also on August 5, 1943. Her baby died in hospital just a few months later. Berkowitz's "offence"—she had stuck a handful of adhesive stickers on walls condemning the Nazi regime. Adolf Hitler personally signed the death sentences and rejected all appeals for clemency.

With its portrayal of the anti-fascist Coppi, Dresen's film reminds us of the varied forms of resistance pursued by young people and working-class circles, so-called ordinary Germans. The film effectively refutes the collective guilt thesis, which claims the overwhelming majority of Germans supported Hitler's fascism. At the same time, *From Hilde, With Love* is highly topical and coincides with mass demonstrations across the country in recent months against the fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD).

The story of Hans and Hilde Coppi and their fellow anti-Nazi opponents was little known in postwar West Germany, where

leading Nazis could make careers for themselves and were able to demonise members of the resistance. Outrageously, the conviction of Coppi and her comrades-in-arms for high treason by the Nazis was only overturned in 2009. Hitler's prosecutor in the Red Orchestra case, Manfred Roeder, lived unmolested in West Germany after the war, was protected by US intelligence, and became a leading speaker in a revitalised fascist party. Throughout the 1950s he defended the accusations of "treason" against the anti-Nazi resistance members.

In East Germany (DDR), the fighters were well known and revered, but the Stalinist ruling regime also used them to distract attention from the fact that Stalin had completely ignored the warnings made by Red Orchestra members that Hitler planned to invade the USSR, together with the refusal of the German Communist Party (KPD) leadership to mobilise the working class against the fascists.

The film begins with Hilde's arrest in 1942 and follows her time in prison until her death. In numerous flashbacks, Hilde recalls lovely episodes of her earlier life: camping on peaceful Lake Lehnitz, her first meeting with Hans and his colourful group of friends, her first political meeting, her role in producing leaflets, Hans' first Morse code attempts and his almost childlike joy after a successful test radio call to Moscow.

Hilde's reasons for taking part in the actions of the group surrounding the German army officer Harro Schulz Boysen and his exuberant wife Liberta are simple. In addition to her affection for Hans, her sincerity and capacity for compassion lead her to conclude in 1942—enough is enough. She learns via the banned Radio Moscow that the Nazi regime lies to the parents of German soldiers when their sons are taken prisoner of war by the Soviets. According to the Nazi propaganda, the Soviet Red Army took no prisoners. Hilde regularly informs grieving parents that their children are in fact alive.

How do you motivate the population against the war? The pacifist slogan of Kurt Tucholsky "Wage war against war" is discarded as inadequate. A small adhesive note is drawn up to counter the Nazi propaganda exhibition "The Soviet Paradise," which seeks to justify an invasion of the USSR, depicting a Bolshevik empire ruled by crude savages in the style of a colonial exhibition. The small note stuck on walls comments ironically: "The Nazi paradise, hunger, Gestapo lies. How much longer?"

When the Gestapo track down the perpetrators, a series of young people are sentenced to death alongside Hilde. Like the others, she is shocked but finds the strength to give birth and lovingly tends to her child in prison. The last moments of her life, filmed in real time, play out agonisingly slowly in front of the viewer. Thirteen young women walk in a row to the execution barracks, realising that this really is the end. Berkowitz, barely an adult, is particularly desperate and is supported by Hilde.

Dresen's camera remains close to the characters throughout the film. Liv Lisa Fries (lead actress in *Babylon Berlin*) is an outstanding Hilde, who fights against her fears to face up to the demands of her situation. The film's clear reference to current forms of resistance is reinforced by the use of timeless clothing and the renunciation of the usual Nazi clichés, such as flags and shouts of "Sieg Heil." Instead of the stereotypical depiction of informers, the film shows a variety of responses. The waiter in a beer garden, for example, overlooks the fact that the soldier he is serving has a pass from the front lines that has long expired.

When the delivery is due, the midwife forgets that Hilde is an enemy of the state and assists with all her ability, while the doctor's expression seems to say: why bother, the child and mother won't live long anyway? A female prison official looks on in the background, expressionless as ever. Later, however, she proceeds to help Hilde as much as she can. The priest does not force the atheist Hilde to pray before her execution, but asks her instead to dictate to him a farewell greeting to her mother, which he pledges to deliver personally. When she is collected for execution with the letter unfinished, the priest suggests the final words: "From Hilde, With Love." Dresen confirms that this kind of solidarity really did exist.

The transition from passive solidarity to active resistance is also confirmed by Stefan Roloff's 2003 documentary film *The Red Orchestra*. The film depicts the resistance circle less as a tightly knit political organisation and more as a fairly large network of disparate groups. Apparently, the political activism intermingled with a much broader, anonymous resistance.

In his 1947 novel *Every Man Dies Alone (Jeder stirbt für sich allein)*, Hans Fallada effectively conveys the mood of "enough is enough" by the postcards distributed in Berlin between 1940 and 1942 by a working class couple. The couple denounced the lies of the government and the social crisis, called for sabotage in the factories, for people to refuse to support collections for the war and for the overthrow of the government.

Non-political young workers, organised as the "Edelweiss Pirates," were executed. A few months before Hilde's execution, Sophie Scholl, a student who had distributed leaflets at Munich University, was also put to death. The severity of the punishments showed the fear on the part of the Nazis of an impending mass uprising.

Dresen's film is highly topical. It is aimed, above all, at the younger generation, which is increasingly coming into conflict with governments that—as in the 1930s—trample on the interests of the population and advance the needs of the ruling capitalist elite on all the issues of war, military rearmament, social cuts, environmental degradation and more.

While director Dresen argues in interviews and discussions that

decency and civil courage are sufficient in the fight against fascism and war, his film shows something else. It makes painfully clear there can be a situation in which an effective struggle has been left too late, and instead the fascist dictatorship is able to crush all resistance. *From Hilde, With Love* is a serious warning the situation must not reach that point and it is necessary to take up the fight against capitalist exploitation, war and fascism with great urgency. The slogan "Never again is now!" then takes on a completely different meaning.

The fight against fascism and war cannot be won without a political, socialist programme and a revolutionary party that has learned the lessons of history and mobilises the working class.

In 1939, Leon Trotsky refused to be "hypnotized by the reported omnipotence of the totalitarian regime" in Germany. As a matter of fact, he argued, "the immobility of the German and Italian workers is determined not at all by the omnipotence of the fascist police but by the absence of a program, the loss of faith in old programs and old slogans, and the prostitution of the Second and Third Internationals." ("A Step Toward Social Patriotism")

The leader of the Red Orchestra, Leopold Trepper, dealt with these questions in his memoirs. He emphasised that Hitler was only able to come to power because Stalin enforced his course in the KPD, and suppressed any serious struggle by the working class. Trepper wrote: "In fact, responsibility for the liquidation of the Berlin group rests with the leadership of the military intelligence service in Moscow and the Central Committee of the illegal Communist Party of Germany."

In his autobiography, Trepper also paid tribute to Trotsky and the Left Opposition: "But who then, at that time, protested? Who stood up to shout his disgust? The Trotskyists are able to claim this honour. Following the example of their leader, who paid for his stubbornness by [receiving] the blow of an axe, they fought Stalinism totally, and they were the only ones."



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