Fatherland: A moving film about Thomas Mann's trip to Germany in 1949

Verena Nees
21 September 2026

In its final scene of Pawe? Pawlikowski's *Fatherland*, set in 1949, German novelist Thomas Mann and his daughter Erika sit alone on a bench in the ruins of a bombed-out church. The organ, a symbol of culture, has not been entirely destroyed. Mechanics are trying to get it to play. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach tentatively begins to sound. Mann is deeply moved and has tears in his eyes.

The black-and-white *Fatherland*—which won the award for Best Director at this year's Cannes Film Festival—tells the story of Mann's first trip to his homeland, Germany, after World War II. The Nobel Prize winning author of *Buddenbrooks*, *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*—among others—had been driven from Germany by the Nazis. After a long exile in California, Mann returned to Europe during the McCarthyite era. He died at the age of 80 in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1955.

In 1949, Mann (Hanns Zischler) and his daughter, the actress, author and cabaret artist Erika (Sandra Hüller), set out on a journey from Frankfurt am Main in the American occupation zone to Soviet-controlled Weimar. As they travel through a divided Germany in a big black Buick, they witness people lost amidst the ruins, as well as border fences and barriers as they cross into the Soviet-controlled East German zone.

Mann, who had called on the German population to resist fascism through radio messages on the BBC during the war, is both applauded and eyed with suspicion. People eager to portray themselves as having been cleansed of the Nazi regime try to co-opt him for political and cultural purposes. On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Goethe's birth, he is invited to deliver a speech on both sides of the internal German border and is honoured with a Goethe Prize in both the West and East of the country.

The title *Fatherland* raises many questions.

In a prologue, Klaus Mann, Thomas Mann's eldest son, expresses his despair over Germany, whose cultural achievements had failed to prevent a relapse into barbarism. The journey itself begins with a drive through the rubble-strewn landscape of a devastated country and a traumatized population. When Erika says toward the end of the film, "I want to go home," her father replies, "Where is that?"

But first things first:

In a hotel room in Cannes, Klaus Mann sits on the floor next to his bed and talks on the phone with his sister Erika, who tells him about the planned trip to Germany.

Klaus replies in a monotone voice:

> I swore to myself, that I would never return to Germany. It's a terrible country with terrible people, with a language actually created for lying. And my father is now the master of it. Why did he actually agree to this trip? They've smashed everything to smithereens, and now he's supposed to help them ease their consciences? He's just making a fool of himself.

Shouldn't we do what the others did—Stefan Zweig or Ernst Toller, for example? Klaus asks, referring to individuals who committed suicide following Hitler's seizure to power. For a moment, there is silence on the other end of the line. Then Erika urgently pleads with her brother to come along on the trip. Klaus gives an evasive answer. He says he'll think it over, and if he does go, it will be only out of love for her.

Shortly after arriving in Frankfurt, Erika and Thomas Mann learn that Klaus has committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

The chronology of events is partly fictional. In reality, Thomas Mann undertook the trip to Germany in July 1949 with his wife Katia; Erika refused to join them, and Klaus's suicide had already occurred three months earlier.

Pawlikowski explained that from the outset, he had no intention of making a biographical film about Thomas Mann. He and his team took such fictional liberties "to combine the personal and the historical in a moving and mutually enriching way." In doing so, they "strived to remain true to the emotional and intellectual truth of the story."

In that he has succeeded. The close intertwining of Klaus Mann's tragic death with the journey of his father and his sister Erika to Germany creates a sense of tension right from the start of the film, stemming from two opposing poles: the deep demoralization among artists, embodied by Klaus Mann, and the stance of Thomas Mann, who initially also steered clear of Germany but sought a way to free its language and culture from the mire of fascist barbarism to make them the foundation for a new beginning and a democratic future. Here, too, lies the connection to Johann Wolfgang Goethe and his humanism and cosmopolitan ideas.

Goethe knows no zones or borders

In Frankfurt, the Manns' arrival is met not only with applause but also with boos. They are confronted by those who want to put their Nazi past behind them, while others accuse them of having sought safety abroad instead of going into "internal exile" in 1933 and help alleviate the suffering of all those who remained in Germany under fascist rule. At a press conference, journalists also attack Mann for his intention of travelling to the East of the country, the zone under Soviet Stalinist control.

Mann retorts that the Goethe who wrote primarily in Weimar (in the east) knew no zones or borders.

At the reception in Frankfurt, he meets the two grandsons of the composer Richard Wagner, Wolfgang and Wieland, who ask him to put in a good word with the Bavarian Minister of Culture for the resumption of the Bayreuth Festival and the restoration of the Festspielhaus. Their mother, the fanatical Hitler admirer Winifred Wagner, had turned the concert house into a Nazi stronghold, "Hitler's court theater," as Thomas

© World Socialist Web Site

Mann once put it.

Starting in 1933, Jewish musicians, conductors, and singers were banned from performing, and from 1940 to 1944, the Nazi organization "Kraft durch Freude" held so-called "war festivals" there.

Mann responds to Wolfgang and Wieland succinctly and firmly: Wagner's music will endure regardless of their efforts. But apart from that, he is in favour of "razing Bayreuth to the ground" and "putting your mother on trial."

And when Erika encounters her former husband Gustav Gründgens (Joachim Meyerhoff), who justifies his collaboration with the Nazis by saying he is, after all, just an actor, she slaps him hard and walks away. To an American friend from the Associated Press, who flinches in shock, she says, "Someone had to do it."

In Weimar in the East the famed novelist is greeted with a staged chorus of cheers in the style of a Stalinist personality cult, while spontaneous crowds simultaneously show him great sympathy. At the same time attempts are made to recruit the famous writer for the cultural policy of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which was to be founded in the same year. His former fellow writer from the Weimar era, the Expressionist poet Johannes R. Becher, president of the Cultural Federation and the first Minister of Culture of the GDR, tries in vain to persuade Mann to join the SED Stalinist bureaucracy. Soviet Major General Tulpanov, who served as Thomas and Erika Mann's security escort during their stay, tries to draw him into a conversation about Goethe and Marx over vodka and wine.

As Erika and Thomas Mann are together in their hotel room on the eve of the award ceremony, a man enters and reports that not only former Nazis but also other political prisoners were being held at the Buchenwald camp. He is immediately escorted away by security officers.

Mann rejects the advances of the Stalinist officials. Back in the hotel room, he hands Erika a glass of vodka with a sarcastic laugh. He remarks that this had been Stalin's favorite drink when he sat down with British Prime Minister Churchill to divide up Europe.

Thomas Mann politely takes his leave at the end, praises Becher's publishing project—a complete edition of Klaus Mann's books, which West German publishers had previously refused to print—and spontaneously stops at the church ruins on the way back.

The dead end of nationalism—then and now

At a press conference in Cannes, Pawlikowski said that *Fatherland* was his most personal film. In several interviews, he mentions his own family history, which made him familiar with the Mann family's experiences amid the turmoil of European history, war and exile.

Born in Warsaw in 1957, Pawlikowski left Poland with his mother at the age of 14 and subsequently lived in Germany, Italy and, beginning in 1977, in Great Britain. There, he studied literature and philosophy and later worked as a documentary filmmaker for the BBC. His personal experiences moving between East and West are reflected in his later feature films, particularly in the Oscar-winning film *Ida* (2013) and in *Cold War—The Latitude of Love* (2018), which won the award for Best Director at Cannes as well as five European Film Awards. Today he once again lives in Warsaw.

His father and grandmother, both doctors, were Jewish. His grandmother was murdered in Auschwitz, as Pawlikowski only learned much later. His father, Wiktor, always described himself as a secular Jew, an atheist, a humanist and a freethinker. After the war, he had reestablished himself in Warsaw, but when the Stalinist Polish government began promoting anti-Semitic tendencies following the March 1968 unrest, he left the country and his family—a devastating blow for his son.

Pawlikowski also sees his film *Fatherland* as his most personal film for another reason, as he emphasizes in an interview with Cineville magazine.

Referring to Klaus Mann's state of mind at the beginning of the film, he explains: "I think many people are feeling something similar right now. A sense of powerlessness, a sense of unease. The feeling that we're stuck in a dead end." At the same time, he empathizes with Thomas Mann, "who isn't that much older than me in the film," and who tries to understand the new world, a task at which Klaus Mann fails. "But this world is moving in a completely different direction, over which he has no control," the director says.

Mann's return to Germany in 1949, according to Pawlikowski, had "obvious parallels to the present day. The old paradigm is dead, the old rules no longer apply, and in their place two crude, mutually exclusive narratives are emerging. Narratives that generalize everything, that suck the oxygen out of the air, that corner you and force you to take sides, and that gradually make it impossible to see clearly and speak freely."

Sandra Hüller, who plays Erika, also relates the film to the present. *Fatherland* is about "adopting a stance toward the world," not letting "personal suffering get you down," and holding fast to one's ideas. "I think the film reminds us that it really is possible to show backbone."

It is also noteworthy that *Fatherland* was produced as a Polish-German-Italian-French co-production and is simultaneously generating a strong response. It is precisely in these countries that nationalist and far-right forces are gaining strength today, while the political establishment continues to shift further to the right. The fact that, in this situation, an international film crew has made the experiences of fascism, war, exile and the destruction of European culture the subject of a major feature film evidently taps into a deep need to grapple with these historical issues. The growing interest in such subject matter suggests that, in the face of militarism, a shift to the right and social crisis, many people are seeking guidance and answers in history and culture.

Culture versus "ethnic nature romanticism" and "combat-readiness"

In his commemorative speech on July 25, 1949, at Frankfurt's Paulskirche and later on August 1 at the Weimar National Theater, Thomas Mann declared: "I know of no zones" and made it clear that he was neither a West German nor an East German writer, but a German writer whose true homeland was the "free German language, untouched by occupation."

Goethe, he said, was the antithesis of Hitler; he stood for education, humanity, cosmopolitanism and intellectual freedom—while Hitler, by contrast, stood for nationalism and barbarism.

Born in 1875, Mann had evolved from the national-conservative educated bourgeois of the war years to a position far to the left during the Weimar Republic. Deeply affected by the political catastrophes of his time, he became increasingly critical of his own earlier positions. He came to realize that the bourgeois world, from which he himself came, could not defend democracy, peace and culture, and turned his attention more and more toward the labor movement. Even before 1933, he had begun to embrace socialist ideas and spoke out explicitly in favour of workers' governments and "social democracy."

As Thomas Mann put it, with regard to "political and social life," the "national idea can no longer claim leadership, or the future, for itself today." The period of its historical mission had been the nineteenth century. "It is an idea of the past and not of the future." Every person "of feeling and reason," he continues, knows that "the peoples of Europe today are no longer able to live and prosper individually and in isolation,

© World Socialist Web Site

but that they are dependent upon one another and form a community of shared destiny, …" ("Speech to Workers in Vienna," 1932, from *Collected Works*, Frankfurt am Main, 1974, vol. XI, p. 890).

He condemns the "völkisch romanticism of nature," the warmongering and the argument of "combat-readiness" [Kriegstüchtigkeit]—thus this is not a new term coined by a German defence minister of today.

Regarding the claim made by the bourgeois parties in the Weimar Republic that they represented democracy, Thomas Mann says: "No, democracy has not been realised—the social democracy in which the peoples wish to live, while their governments thwart it in the name of the fatherland. Another League of Nations would be necessary, one other than that of Geneva: a league of peoples against their governments, which fail to carry out their will for peace; and the intellectual person born into the bourgeoisie must say to himself today that, if worker governments stood at the head of the principal states of Europe today instead of bourgeois or feudal governments, the continent would have advanced a good deal further than, unfortunately, is the case, along the path of order, reason and recovery."

Given the current dangers of escalating war and the rise of nationalist and fascist tendencies, these words are once again highly relevant.

Last year, politicians from the ruling parties used the 150th anniversary of Thomas Mann's birth as an opportunity to cloak their own return to war and fascism in democratic rhetoric, thereby distorting his legacy.

At the opening of the anniversary exhibition in Mann's hometown of Lübeck, titled, "My Time: Thomas Mann and Democracy," Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) declared the writer to be a defender of "Weimar democracy" and a role model for today's so-called "democrats," while Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, also of the SPD, is drumming up support across the country for the "combat readiness" that Mann had so sharply denounced.

Even today, Mann would not stand on the side of the parties in the Bundestag that are once again pursuing rearmament, war and social destruction in the name of democracy and the defense of the "fatherland."

Mann's legacy lies entirely in the hands of workers internationally and their struggle for a socialist society—a cause to which the writer had felt drawn in the final years of his life.

Mann was not a revolutionary socialist. But his experiences with the Weimar Republic, fascism and war led him to the realization that the defense of democracy, culture and peace could not be achieved within the framework of capitalism.

Pawlikowski's *Fatherland* is an important work that deserves a wide audience.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site