The fifth and final season of *Babylon Berlin*—strengths and weaknesses

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1 November 2026

The fifth and final season of Germany's expensive, lavish and widely watched television series *Babylon Berlin* aired in September and is scheduled for English-language distribution at the start of 2027.

Based on a series of novels by Volker Kutscher, the previous four seasons covered the period from 1929 to 1931. The latest season begins with Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on 30 January 1933, and proceeds to the Reichstag fire of February 27-28, less than one month later. The fire provided Hitler the grounds for the mass arrests of leftists and the suspension of democratic rights established in the course of the post-WWI Weimar Republic.

The series is co-written and co-directed by three prominent German directors, Tom Tykwer (*Run Lola Run, Heaven, Cloud Atlas*), Achim von Borries (*Love in Thoughts, 4 Days in May*) and Henk Handloegten (*Learning to Lie, Summer Window*). Handloegten also collaborated in the newly released film *Vaterland*.

The central characters of the series are the detectives Gereon Rath (Volker Bruch) and the young Berliner Charlotte Ritter (Liv Lisa Fries). We already knew that Rath was a traumatised victim of WW1 and during the initial episodes of Season 5, the audience is left in doubt as to the political inclinations of the detective. It is only in the final episodes that it becomes clear that Rath is determined to use all means necessary to stop the dictator.

A documentary accompanying the fifth season makes clear the huge lengths gone to by the production team to recreate the era of the late Weimar Republic, wracked by crisis following Germany's defeat in the first world war. An entire set was built to recreate Weimar Berlin and extraordinary care was taken to use costumes corresponding to the times. The documentary also points out that, at the start of the series, the figure of Hitler, still widely regarded as a political outsider in 1929, was barely mentioned. Just four years later, following the Wall Street Crash, mass unemployment and drastic government austerity measures, Hitler is center stage and dictating German policy.

What the series gets right

Various scenes and episodes make patently clear the class nature of the fascist regime. Hitler is in power but by no means commands universal support. A number of scenes are devoted to the annual carnival held in Cologne, using in part original documentary footage. A predominately working class public has gathered in a beer cellar to celebrate a holiday traditionally used to castigate and satirise those in power. One of the acts performed in the beery atmosphere of the cellar is a ventriloquist. Sitting on his lap is an absurd puppet—its head clearly identifiable as Hitler's. Jeers and laughter erupt around the room as the puppet commences to speak demagogically and denounce the ventriloquist. One member of the audience reaches forward and snatches away the head of the puppet, which is then kicked around the room like a football by a group of contemptuous workers.

Meanwhile, 60 kilometres north of Berlin, Hitler is being feted by leading members of the so-called German conservative revolution, a grouping of aristocrats and far-right nationalist intellectuals who regard the lowly corporal as their own useful puppet, and fully support his party's measures to wipe out all leftist opposition.

In one of the final scenes of the series, a leader of the conservative revolution, Alfred Nyssen (Lars Eidinger) has prepared a feast for the new chancellor at his castle, Schloss Lieberberg. Nyssen has invited most of Germany's leading industrialists who he describes as the supervisory board of the corporation Deutschland AG, with Adolf Hitler as chairman.

Giving orders to his servants, Nyssen points out where Hitler is to sit at the head of the long festive table. He then proceeds to list the seats reserved for all of Germany's leading industrialists—namely Günther Quandt, Friedrich Flick, Carl Bosch, Alfried Krupp, Ferdinand Porsche, Karl Merck, Wilhelm von Opel and Hermann von Siemens. All of these companies benefited enormously from Nazi rearmament, forced labour, state contracts and the expansion of the war economy and most of the families involved were able to re-establish their industrial empires in postwar West Germany.

Additional places at the table are reserved for the former Chancellor Franz von Papen, who played a key role in leveraging Hitler into power, together with the magnate of Germany's biggest press and media empire and Papen's ally, Alfred Hugenberg. The fictional scene in *Babylon Berlin* clearly references the actual meeting of February 20, 1933, when Hitler, Hermann Göring and the banker Hjalmar Schacht met with around 20 leading industrialists to raise finances for the forthcoming election campaign.

These scenes strike home and powerfully refute the theory of "collective guilt"; i.e., that Hitler's ascent to power was due to the universal approval of the German population. In fact Hitler's main source of political support came from demoralised layers of the petite bourgeoisie. What became decisive, in his takeover of power in 1933, was the sponsorship afforded Hitler by most of Germany's main industrial barons.

Other episodes vividly depict the thuggishness of Göring's storm troopers who take to the streets to beat up and arrest Communist and Social Democratic opponents of the fascists. In episode 3, Göring orders his SA [original militia of the Nazi Party] to penetrate the police apparatus and prepare mass arrests. The series then shows how the journalist Samuel Katelbach (with a resemblance to pacifist journalist Carl von Ossietzky), the left-wing lawyer Hans Litten and the editor of the newspaper *Tempo* are rounded up and imprisoned by fascist goons. We witness the ruthlessness of Gestapo thugs who beat and torture their political opponents—the first occupants of the Oranienburg concentration camp.

Witnessing the ruthlessness with which the SA proceeds against its enemies, a number of Rath's police colleagues prefer to capitulate and lamely work alongside their new masters, accurately reflecting the stance taken by broad layers of the existing state apparatus.

The series' treatment of the Reichstag fire also deserves attention. Immediately after the burning down of the German parliament building, the Nazi leadership denied any involvement. This interpretation remained

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the prevailing position among German historians for decades until fresh investigations revealed that such a scenario was not credible. The burning down of a huge building such as the Reichstag by a single person, the young Dutch anarchist Marinus van der Lubbe, who suffered from severely impaired vision, simply played into the hands of the fascists.

While fictional elements have been inserted, the depiction of the fire in *Babylon Berlin* firmly lays the blame on the Nazis led by Göring. We witness how a fascist infiltrator into the communist party befriends the half-blind van der Lubbe. Provided with an SA pass, which allows him to get through security, the Dutchman enters the building with the expectation that he is carrying out an act of political protest. Göring's men are already inside the building and create additional fires. They flee the scene leaving van der Lubbe alone, to be arrested as the apparent sole perpetrator. Hitler, Göring and propaganda minister Goebbels have the ideal pretext for the mass arrest and incarceration of thousands of Communists, Social Democrats and trade unionists.

Less successful is a subplot evidently drawing from Weimar movies dealing with the themes, popular at the time, of hypnosis and mind control, such as *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (Fritz Lang) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene). The subplot centres around a supposed secret medical file with details of a lowly German soldier struck blind during the fighting towards the end of WWI. The patient (clearly Hitler himself) is cured of his delusions by an army doctor who appeals to his egoism and drive for power. The Nazis are desperate to get their hands on the incriminating document and it is only the army doctor and detective Rath who stand in their way.

Where the series goes seriously astray

The series devotes considerable time and space to the roles of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD), in particular the failure of both parties to unite in a campaign to oppose the fascists. The issue is first taken up in the second episode of the season. Seated in a Berlin cafe, Austrian journalist Samuel Katelbach and lawyer Hans Litten share a cake and discuss the arithmetic of the last Reichstag vote held in the autumn of 1932. In that election Hitler's NSDAP lost votes compared to the spring election in the same year. Cutting the cake according to the percentages won by the various parties in the autumn election of 1932, the pair conclude that the combined vote of SPD and KPD of 37.3 percent exceeded the vote for the Nazis.

The issue emerges again in episode five of the season. In a number of previous scenes we witness the inability of the SPD and KPD to drop their differences and arrive at a united front in parliament to oppose the Nazis. The solution is provided by the stoical and resourceful proletarian Elisabeth Behnke, who has so far concentrated her energies on running the Katelbach household. Radicalised by what is taking place around her, she commences reading at bedtime the writings of the revolutionary Marxist and co-founder of the German Communist Party, Rosa Luxemburg.

Dressing up as a relative of Rosa, with the name Clara Luxemburg, Behnke ignores the squabbling male leaders of the SPD and KPD and approaches female politicians from both parties, arguing for common action against the Nazis.

These scenes are striking, above all by their complete failure to mention the principal advocate of a united front of the SPD and KPD, Leon Trotsky. It was first and foremost Trotsky who advocated a united front of the KPD and SPD against the Nazis from the autumn of 1930 onwards, and then with mounting urgency through 1931–1933, as the fascist threat grew. Trotsky stressed that such a united front must be limited to practical collaboration to combat the Nazis and excluded any dilution or compromise of political principles on the part of the Communist Party.

His position was developed in a series of articles and interviews written from exile, and directed against the two forces that were jointly preparing the catastrophe: the Social Democratic leadership's policy of "lesser evil" support for the austerity policies of Chancellor Brüning, and the Stalinist Comintern's "social fascism" line, which treated the SPD as the main enemy and thereby rejected any common action against Hitler.

Not only did the KPD, on orders from Moscow, argue that the SPD were "social fascists," the party went so far as to collaborate with the fascists against the SPD. In the Prussian referendum of August 1931, the KPD actually joined the campaign to overthrow the SPD-led government in the state of Prussia. The referendum initiated by the Nazi-affiliated Stahlhelm [steel helmet] failed, but the episode demonstrates how far the KPD's hostility to the SPD had gone.

The situation was even more striking in the Berlin transport workers' strike of November 1932, when the KPD's trade-union section worked alongside the Nazis against the established free trade unions. These examples of collaboration with the Nazis created huge confusion within the working class and allowed the fascists to gain ground in former Communist strongholds in Germany's major cities and industries.

These developments are not dealt with in the series which skips over the crucial year of 1932. At the same time Trotsky's role is ignored and instead he is replaced by a phony Luxemburg figure—the real Rosa had been murdered in 1919 by far right soldiers in the course of a vicious anti-communist campaign whipped up by the SPD.

The scenes devoted to the failure of the SPD and KPD to unite do a double injustice–first, by entirely blotting out Trotsky's role, and second, by presenting the outstanding revolutionary Luxemburg simply as an advocate for a parliamentary unity between the SPD and KPD to stop Hitler.

Had she still been alive Luxemburg would have undoubtedly sided with Trotsky in insisting that the question of power could not be decided by elections or parliamentary majorities but only by the mass mobilisation of the working class under conditions where workers had only months, perhaps weeks, to act. As for Trotsky, the hostility of the makers of *Babylon Berlin* to the great revolutionary was already apparent in the first series, reviewed here.

Tykwer and other members of his team have made clear in a number of interviews that they are quite aware of the relevance and urgency of their series under conditions where far-right parties are once again gaining ground, not just in Germany and America but throughout the world.

Tykwer in particular has declared he was motivated to make the series by the experience of his grandparents who had undergone fascism in Germany. It is likely that under today's conditions *Babylon Berlin* will win a wide audience, but it fails badly by ignoring the struggle waged by Trotsky and his supporters against the criminal policy of the Stalinist bureaucracy while, at the same time, reducing Rosa Luxemburg to an opportunist advocate of parliamentary manoeuvres against the fascists.

Hitler could not be stopped by parliamentary cretinism and moral appeals in the thirties, nor can such measures stop the biggest opposition party in today's Bundestag—the fascist Alternative for Germany.

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