

Downfall

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel
Germany: Constantin Film Produktion, 2004. 176 mins.

Downfall, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel and released in 2004, is based upon the events surrounding the final days of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Formed from the much-admired Third Reich historian Joachim Fest's book *Inside Hitler's Bunker* and bolstered with the naivety encapsulated in the memoirs of Traudl Junge, Hitler's personal secretary, the film is testament to Hirschbiegel's ability to blend both a strong semblance of historical accuracy with a gripping and fear-provoking insight into the final days of the Nazi elite. The main characters are Adolf Hitler (played by Bruno Ganz) and Traudl Junge, (played by Alexandra Maria Lara). The film is set inside both Hitler's Berlin bunker and the surrounding Chancellery district in late April 1945. The film also portrays the strong emotional turmoil surrounding the demise of the senior Nazi hierarchy immediately prior to Germany's surrender to Allied forces on May 7 1945. The film covers a range of issues including Nazism, democracy, totalitarianism, political betrayal and war crimes.

The film commences with a narration by Junge regarding her bitter feelings at first agreeing to work for Hitler after the initial 'interview' with four other women in November 1942 at Hitler's HQ, *Wolfsschanze*, at Rastenburg, East Prussia. She asserts that whilst she admits naivety, she was however not a follower of Nazi ideology. Indeed, as the film progresses, one begins to feel that Junge merely exhibited the hypnotic influence that Hitler held over many German people, military and civilian, during his dictatorship.

The film then shifts to central Berlin in April 1945, around the Chancellery district, as Russian artillery begins to signal the final assault upon Berlin—a clear contradiction to the situation three years previous. It is Hitler's birthday, 20 April 1945, and one begins to see that he is clearly a man who is becoming increasingly enraged as he clutches at any perceived opportunity to delay the inevitable collapse of his Third Reich. Indeed, the Nazi hierarchy continue to enter the bunker, provide him with updates of the desperate situation facing Germany—yet he is in total denial and willing to sacrifice everything and everyone. Undeniably, the situation and level of

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desperation is reinforced in the fact that child soldiers are now the front line of Berlin's defence. It is at this stage that one begins to compare the situation just over a decade earlier when Hitler ascended to power under the mandate to unite the German people – however, ten years on, Hitler is now willing to sacrifice them. The fervent nationalism that catapulted Hitler to his Chancellorship in 1933 and his dedication to the German *Volk*, and his later willingness to abandon them to growing deprivations and a fight for survival as the Soviets encircle Berlin, displays a fearsome and loathsome dark side of Hitler—arguably a side that was always present but never truly made obvious until the end.

The film then focuses upon the Nazi elite, their selfishness and reluctance to acknowledge imminent defeat. For example, SS Leader Himmler is seen as a conspiratorial, self-serving individual who believed that he would be able to take the leadership from Hitler and negotiate with Eisenhower. One sees the absurdity of this as he obviously feels totally absolved from his key role in the genocide of six million Jews, and is more focused on whether to salute or shake hands with Eisenhower—regardless of his war crimes. Interestingly, it is at this stage that one begins to see the ongoing betrayal of Hitler by many of his other Nazi lieutenants. Whereas on one hand they offer their undying loyalty to him, on the other hand, they are undertaking individual steps towards escaping and negotiating surrender with the Allies.

The other senior hierarchy included Göring, Bormann, Goebbels, Speer and SS Professor Dr. Schenck. Speer is seen as a member who remains loyal to Hitler, not out of a commitment to Nazi ideology but as loyalty to Hitler—his architectural mentor and friend. This is contrasted alongside the loyalty depicted of Joseph Goebbels and his wife Magda, who remain loyal to Hitler—not out of a sense of loyalty to Hitler the individual, but as a commitment to Nazi ideology. One sees the desperation in the Goebbels family where they choose to murder their six children as Magda Goebbels states to Speer, “I won't allow the children to grow up in a world without Nationalist Socialism.”

Death then becomes an increasingly common occurrence amongst the bunker's Nazi elite as the Soviet forces move closer to the bunker surrounds. When Hitler enacts the policy of Clausewitz, it effectively prevents Berlin's civilians and wounded soldiers

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being evacuated and surrender impossible. This decision by Hitler is the epitome of Nazi fanaticism and is illustrated in Joseph Goebbels' statement to Speer, "They [the German people] gave us their mandate—and now their little throats are being cut." One then reflects back to 1933 when free elections were held and the Nazis received the majority vote—arguably, democracy gone wrong.

As the turmoil continues unabated in and around the bunker, Traudl Junge becomes increasingly conscious of the desperate situation facing her and the other bunker occupants. Additionally, she is also beginning to fully realise that Nazism is but the personification of selfish fanaticism, as the fate of Berlin's inhabitants are to be sacrificed for the fanaticism of a few.

Both Speer and Schenck emerge as independent voices of reason and common sense. Individually, they attempt to circumvent incidents of Nazi zealotry in order to protect civilians and wounded soldiers—all in the face of potential conflict with other Nazis. A divide also begins to emerge within the German military. On one side there are the Nazi fanatics; whilst on the other side there are the loyal German *Junkers* who remain loyal to their philosophy of obedience to one's duty and dedication to Germany the nation—not Nazism. Arguably, both Speer and Schenck are more dedicated to the nation—not an ideology. Of significance is Hitler's perceived closeness with Speer, where Hitler asks Speer for advice on what to do when the collapse of the Reich was becoming imminently closer. Hitler says, "Speer, what do you say?" to which Speer simply says that Hitler should leave with Eva Braun. It is at this stage that one actually feels some semblance of pity towards Hitler as having being deserted by his 'loyal' lieutenants, he is left to face his downfall with only one true confidante left—Speer. However, the viewer soon regains a sense of realism and sees that Hitler's downfall is but a consequence of his egocentric murderous personality.

Hitler, now close to suicide, makes one last profound statement to General Mohnke where he states "The Western democracies are decadent. They will be defeated by those disciplined people of the East." This leaves the viewer with a perception that Hitler was anticipating future conflict—arguably the looming Cold War.

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However, the collapse of the Reich becomes a reality when surrender is announced on 7 May 1945. The film concludes with a depiction of Junge's escape to freedom and her concluding narration where she reinforces that whilst her naivety gave way to false delusions—in no way does she feel responsible for the Nazi onslaught. It would be accurate to view that Junge's statement reinforces the view of the majority of Germans at the conclusion of World War Two.

Overall, the film, whilst clearly intent on capturing the attention of a large viewing audience—thus utilising the Hollywood style 'historical enhancement' generally accepted for this genre of film—is nonetheless more focused towards factual representation than many other films based upon this period. It maintains a strong and essentially accurate depiction of the downfall of the twentieth century's most evil dictator and his henchmen—aided by a reliance upon the historical accuracy derived from Joachim Fest and Traudl Junge's respective contributions. Additionally, the use of Traudl Junge as narrator provides a valuable and accurate historical context to the film, effectively juxtaposing it between documentary and entertainment. The film also reinforces the faith in humanity and compassion—even when total war abounds. The exemplary acting provides a gripping and powerful insight into the emotions, personality cults and fanaticism surrounding the final days of Adolf Hitler and Nazism.

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