



The Downfall

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

Oliver Hirschbiegel's film *Der Untergang* – *The Downfall* in English – is a controversial film about the downfall of The Third Reich. Most of the action is played out in the fuhrer's bunker under the Reich Chancellery in Berlin in April 1945, and paints an intimate portrait of Adolf Hitler and his staff.

How does one depict one of the most demonic figures of modern history? And is it at all possible to make a film about Hitler and his final days without sentimentalizing and humanizing the Nazis – or at least some of them – so that we feel a certain sympathy for them and Hitler?

In other words, is Hitler best portrayed through a (continued) demonization of him? Or is the demonic element in him best expressed through his humanization? Or, as the German newspaper "Bild" asked: "Is it permissible to portray a monster as a human being?"

After having seen the film, I for one am not in doubt. It is exactly because Hitler is humanized, as he is in the film, that it is possible to insist that the Nazis' atrocities were committed by *human beings* and not by some demon from a different world. This makes the film much more relevant and existential.

Hitler is occasionally shown with likeable, human features, even if he never does become likeable. He treats the young Traudl Junge with understanding and kindness when, in 1942, she applies for the position of his private secretary, although for sheer nervousness she makes many typing errors when the dictator dictates. He is seen with one of the Goebbels children on his knee – but he is not shown as the country's loving father figure. He is a despot, a man broken in body and mind, a man who has completely lost his sense of reality and who orders his generals to fight against the advancing Red Army with armies that no longer exist.

The humanization of Hitler does not relativize the cruelty of his and Nazism's ideology and acts. Instead they are thrown into sharp relief. He is a human who acts in an inhuman way – with no room for compassion. In one of the last scenes in the film he is seen sitting at the dinner table with his staff, telling them that he has never shown any empathy for weak persons. Here Hitler is shown to be possessed, if you will, by another person, namely Friedrich Nietzsche. The strong person has a right

to sacrifice the weak – even the civilian population. Personal honor is more important than the life of the people. His downfall must also be the people's downfall, for in the final analysis the people alone are responsible for their own fate since they failed him.

In a way it is easier to deal with Hitler the demon than Hitler the human being, as he is described in the film. A young Dane, Carsten Stage, has seen this clearly:

The Nazi leader was, in short, a human being who did inhuman things ... If we view Hitler as a diabolical figure from a different world, we can keep him at arm's length, but when we see a smiling Hitler at ease with his secretaries, he comes too close. He is too much like us. We cannot keep him at a distance.

In this way *The Downfall* helps to remind us, as Carsten Stage also says, that "there will always be inhuman monsters as long as there are human beings." And we might add that even if we deal with extremes in the case of Hitler and Nazism, there is still evil in the world that needs to be fought. And the question suggests itself: Could such evil come from us?

Traudl Junge, who died of old age in 2002 and whose memoirs are one of the sources for the film, is given the last word in the film in an interview. Here she speaks about the guilt which has haunted her all through life; a person is never too young to be guilty.

Never have I seen a movie audience leave the cinema so quietly. I saw the film late Easter Sunday – after having celebrated the resurrection of Christ. What a contrast between Hitler's despotic power and Jesus' self-sacrificing service *for the people* – a sacrifice that meant death for Jesus but life for the people.

It is never too late to remember. The memory of the cruelties committed by people under the Third Reich must be kept alive. *The Downfall* helps us to do this. But the memory of the complicity of a major part of the Christian church must not be glossed over either. No one involved in Jewish evangelism today can avoid this painful memory.

And speaking of the downfall of the Third Reich sixty years ago, we must also call to mind Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who belonged to the minority in the Protestant church that fought against the nazification of the church. He was charged with high treason for having taken part in a conspiracy against the regime, and on April 9, 1945 Bonhoeffer and other conspirators were executed, three weeks before Hitler took his own life on April 30.

When the 39-year-old Bonhoeffer was led away to be executed, he said something like this: "This is the end – but for me it is the beginning of life."

What a contrast to the apocalyptic atmosphere in the bunker under the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, April 1945.

