



# **FORBIDDEN FILMS**

**THE HIDDEN LEGACY OF NAZI FILM**

**A FILM BY FELIX MOELLER**

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# FORBIDDEN FILMS

## THE HIDDEN LEGACY OF NAZI FILM

**1,200 feature films were made in Germany's Third Reich. According to experts, some 100 of these are blatant propaganda. More than 40 remain—nearly seventy years after the end of the Nazi regime—under lock and key. This is their story.**

The Third Reich (1933-1945) produced over 1,200 feature films. Today – in many cases over 70 years after they were made – more than 40 of these films remain banned from public screening in Germany and many other countries, even though the German constitution prohibits political censorship. None of these films may be released on DVD or broadcast on television – they can only be shown behind closed doors at scholarly events. In some cases, unauthorized screenings are punishable by law. A foundation evaluates the films made by the German production company UFA, which was nationalized under Nazi rule.

The justification for keeping the Nazi films locked away is their propagandistic, racist, anti-Semitic and incendiary content. In part, the basis for these decisions dates back to the Allied occupation of Germany after World War II.

What kinds of films are these that they should still be considered dangerous over 65 years after the end of Nazi rule? Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will", Veit Harlan's anti-Semitic "Jew Süß", or the botched pseudo-documentary "The Eternal Jew" might ring a bell. You may have heard of "Kolberg" or "Hitler Youth Quex". The rest are virtually unknown. But interest in these films is growing – as is their mythologization. A number of these films have achieved cult status on the Internet. The controversy is gaining momentum: should these films be made freely available?

Some viewers argue that free thinking citizens should be allowed to decide for themselves whether Goebbels' film propaganda still poses a threat today. In their eyes, the films are hopelessly dated and unwittingly comical, and completely banning them is unrealistic, since they are partly available online anyway. Others still consider Nazi ideology inflammatory, or insist that showing anti-Semitic or anti-Polish propaganda, even after all this time, is disrespectful to the last remaining survivors of the Holocaust and Nazi regime. Not to mention that right-leaning viewers also attend screenings while of course pirated copies of the films also

circulate among the radical right. Some of these Nazi films were released after just minor, cosmetic changes; often, editing out a swastika or flag was enough for a film to be allowed to come out on DVD. These formally “sanitized” – or, arguably, history-censoring – versions are extremely controversial.

The original copies and negatives are disintegrating, and the film archives can't afford to restore them – which is out of the question anyway, since their distribution is prohibited. The dark legacy of Nazi film is at risk of being lost forever. But is this the right way to dispose of the past?

This documentary examines the notorious banned Nazi films and their ideological messages. Renowned film historians analyze the footage while famous directors take the measure of their Third-Reich peers and predecessors. Many film excerpts are shown for the first time since 1945. Controversial public debates after screenings and neo-Nazi indoctrination sessions are also brought under the lens.

The documentary travels to several cities – including Jerusalem, Paris, Berlin and Munich – to see if the films' slow poison is still potent. It also looks for responsibility. Where are the Nazi's abettors in German film? How much responsibility do the actors and directors carry? The descendants of Nazi stars are willing to talk. And finally, what does all this mean to us today? How should we deal with this dark legacy: is any of it worth preserving, or should it be allowed to disappear once and for all?

# FELIX MOELLER

## Writer and Director

An author, director and a producer with a PhD in History, Felix Moeller wrote and directed the documentaries *The Verhoevens* (2003), *Hildegard Knef – The Early Years* (2005), *Katja Riemann* (2006), *Harlan – In the Shadow of Jew Süß* (2009), and *Forbidden Films* (2014). He was also the producer or co-producer of *Julia Franck* (documentary, 2009), *Harlan – In The Shadow of Jew Süß* and *Forbidden Films* as well as the German-French feature films *Queen To Play* (2009), *Small World* (2010) and *Diplomacy* (2014). He was a researcher and consultant for a great number of documentary and feature films like *The Power of Image: Leni Riefenstahl* (1992), *One Day in September* (1999), *Marlene Dietrich – Her Own Song* (2001), *Rosenstrasse* (2003), *Napola* (2004) and *Hannah Arendt* (2012).

# **AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR FELIX MOELLER**

**Are these old films really still so “dangerous” that they need to be kept locked up in a “poison cabinet”?**

That’s the question: Are they nothing but historical documents at this point or still effective ideological messages? There’s no simple answer. I also thought that, 70 years after the end of World War II, they couldn’t possibly still upset anyone that much, but then, during the many projections and audience discussions in Germany and abroad, I noticed that there’s still quite a bit of poison in them. No doubt the restrictive way the films are handled today is also partly a foreign policy decision. Nobody wants to see the headline “Germany declares (anti-Russian/anti-Semitic/anti-Polish) Nazi films OK and makes them available to the public” in the Russian, British or American press.

**One movie theater shows “Jew Süß” about 60 times a year. So the film isn’t off limits after all...?**

DVDs and television broadcasts aren’t permitted, and every projection has to take place in the context of a lecture and discussion. In principle, this isn’t a bad idea—you learn quite a bit about the films. But it’s also very forcedly educational and didactic, and it also implies: You adult citizens of a free society aren’t mature enough to watch this without “guidance.” Young people in particular react with skepticism. Both Spiegel TV and Arte wanted to broadcast Nazi films from the list of restricted titles. They only managed to do so once, almost 20 years ago.

**And yet, a number of Nazi films are available for sale on DVD...**

Yes, there are several films where you wonder why they’re permitted—“Wunschkonzert” (“Request Concert”), for example, which is pure Nazi propaganda. But the really harsh anti-Semitic, racist offerings aren’t among them.

**But you can watch these films online and obtain them abroad?**

Many films are available online, sometimes in very low quality, but a lot is lost in this format—for example, really perfidious details that the Nazi filmmakers purposely used, like stereotypical Jewish figures in the background. Their effect barely

registers with the pixilation; the Nazis definitely created their propaganda for the big screen. Pirated copies are available from rightwing mail order companies, and some of the films are distributed in the US—there's even a sort of "premium edition" of "Jew Süss."

### **What's it like to watch Nazi propaganda films for months while editing in post-production?**

Awful. The songs and marches, especially, really stay with you. You inadvertently find yourself whistling along to "Unsere Fahne flattert uns voran" ("Our flag flutters us forward") from "Hitler Youth Quex." But it also gives you a chance to study a repressed part of German film history, and you learn a lot about German society and why it fell for this ideology in the process. Some of these films are really well made and convey their messages sometimes through overpowering scenes, sometimes very subtly, making it difficult to evade them completely.

### **Technically speaking, what was it like to handle these decades-old films for your project?**

For the documentary, we began by 2k scanning many copies from the Nazi era in high resolution and restoring numerous segments, both image and audio. Arri Berlin did a terrific job with this. What's stored in the archives is truly a negative film treasure. Some of the films we requested were no longer usable as master copies—they've already been lost to us. Or they only exist as highly flammable nitrocellulose material. (Obviously, there are tens of thousands of films that should be preserved, not just those from the "Third Reich" era.) But I'm confident that this isn't how we'll rid ourselves of the Nazi film legacy.

### **What risks does making the films available to the public still pose?**

Releasing authorized DVDs of the films would also necessarily mean they had been approved by the FSK, Germany's film rating agency—and, in theory, that would mean that Neo-Nazis could rent movie theaters to watch anti-Semitic movies there. And making DVDs of, say, "Jew Süss" available might also entail criminal complaints.

## **So the status quo will be maintained, with everything swept under the carpet?**

The new management of the Murnau Foundation is open-minded, but people are wary, politically speaking, as is the case when it comes to any Nazi issues. There are no prizes to be won by investing tax money in restoring and preserving Nazi propaganda films. And yet it has to be done, since anything else would be a cold disposal of history, by simply letting this legacy deteriorate from neglect. After all, not only the shining moments of German film, like "Metropolis" or "Die Nibelungen" ("The Nibelungs"), deserve to be preserved, but its dark side, too. Even—especially—without their being distributed on DVD, the films need to be digitalized, since soon hardly any movie theaters will still be able to project the old film copies.

## **An entire segment of your film is dedicated to the Nazi euthanasia film "I Accuse." Why is that?**

It's an extremely interesting, little-known film that really touches a nerve in viewers. A very well-made melodrama that seems to be about assisted suicide—a topic that's also very topical today due to the recent policy debate. And then you discover that the Nazis made the film to psychologically accompany the annihilation of hundreds of thousands mentally and physically ill people. Even so, some viewers thought the film could easily be remade into a good TV movie today. We organized a projection in the presence of the director's daughter, the actor Johanna Liebeneiner. She was appalled by the film and by the fact that her father, who was a talented director, had put himself in the service of Goebbels in this way.

## **Your film also looks at how Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" is handled. Do you see parallels in this to the "forbidden films"?**

The decision about how to proceed with "Mein Kampf" is just around the corner, since the text will become freely available in 2015, according to German copyright law. First, a critical edition was considered the right way to go, to prevent abuse, and a lot of time and money was invested in it; now, they want publication of the book to be subject to prosecution. This is definitely somewhat comparable to the uncertainty and "taboo-ification" surrounding the films.

## LIST OF FILMS FEATURED IN FORBIDDEN FILMS

Synopses adapted from IMDb or written by Felix Moeller

### **Stukas** (dir. Karl Ritter, 1941)

This Nazi propaganda film details the exploits of a group of German Luftwaffe pilots flying Stukas—fighter-bombers—in the Battle of France in the early days of World War II. It depicts the German bombardments of Rotterdam as heroic and ends with the pilots preparing for the ultimate battle against Britain. One traumatized pilot is cured with Wagner music and thus joyfully returns to the front.

### **Uncle Kruger / Ohm Krüger** (dir. Hans Steinhoff, 1941)

Biopic of Paul Kruger, the Boer guerilla fighter turned statesman and first president of South Africa. At the end of the film, the brave Boer freedom fighters have to surrender to the British colonial army and its brutal methods. The film also accuses the British of building the first concentration camps.

### **Homecoming / Heimkehr** (dir. Gustav Ucicky, 1941)

This Nazi propaganda film attempts to justify the invasion of Poland—and thus the start of World War II—by "showing" how the ethnic Germans in Poland were discriminated against and oppressed by the Poles, and how they were rescued from extinction only by the intervention of the German army.

### **The Family Tree of Dr. Pistorius / Der Stammbaum des Dr. Pistorius** (dir. Karl Georg Külb, 1939)

The small town, small minded upper middle class Dr Pistorious is proud of his aristocratic roots. But he has to recognize that in the new people's community of National Socialist Germany there is no room for old fashioned class snobishness.

### **Storm Trooper Brand / S.A.-Mann Brand** (dir. Franz Seitz, 1933)

This Nazi propaganda film tells the story of a young truck driver who is having trouble making ends meet until he is exposed to the teachings of Adolf Hitler. He joins the S.A.—aka Storm Troopers—and manages to convert his father—a worker and former soldier with Marxist leanings—and his girlfriend of the rightness of the Nazi cause.

### **Our Flags Lead Us Forward / Hitlerjunge Quex: Ein Film vom Opfergeist der deutschen Jugend** (dir. Hans Steinhoff, 1933)

A Nazi propaganda film based upon the life and death of Heini Volker. Heini joins the Hitler Youth against the will of his proletarian Marxist father. Pursued by Communist thugs, he is killed while distributing Nazi flyers in a Communist neighborhood.

### **Jew Süß/ Jud Süß** (dir. Veit Harlan, 1940)

In this notorious Nazi propaganda historical costume melodrama, a conniving, ambitious Jewish businessman, Süß Oppenheimer, snares a post as treasurer to the Duke of Wurttemberg by showering the corrupt duke with treasure and promises of even greater riches. As the Jew's schemes

grow more elaborate and his actions more brazen, the dukedom nearly erupts into civil war. Persuaded by the Jew, the Duke all but scuttles the constitution and alienates the assembly by lifting the local ban on Jews in Stuttgart. In a final outrage, the Jew rapes a wholesome German girl and tortures her father and fiancée. When the Duke succumbs to a sudden heart attack, the assembly of Elders try the Jew and sentence him to death for having "carnal knowledge of a Christian woman."

### **The Eternal Jew / Der ewige Jude** (dir. Fritz Hippler, 1940)

In perhaps the most notorious of Nazi propaganda films, the Jews of Poland are depicted as filthy, evil, corrupt, and intent on world domination. Street scenes are shown prejudicially, along with clips from Jewish cinema of the day and photos of Jewish celebrities, while the narrator "explains" the "Jewish problem." The climax and resolution of the film is Hitler's 1939 announcement that the Jewish race will meet its "annihilation" (Vernichtung).

### **The Rothschilds / Die Rothschilds** (dir. Erich Waschneck, 1940)

Anti-semitic Nazi propaganda "biography" of the Rothschilds, a German Jewish family whose members rose to the top of the European banking community during the Napoleonic era. With headquarters in London and Frankfurt, the Rothschilds are portrayed as corrupt parvenues making the most profit out of war and bloodshed.

### **Above All in the World / Über alles in der Welt** (dir. Karl Ritter, 1941)

A Nazi propaganda film which shows German citizens in European countries like France and Great Britain being "hunted down" and imprisoned after the outbreak of WWII.

### **The Red Terror / G.P.U.** (dir. Karl Ritter, 1942)

This "anti-Bolshevik" film depicts the Soviet intelligence organization GPU as the center of evil, carrying out a program of infiltration and sabotage in Western Europe to prepare for Soviet domination.

### **Carl Peters** (dir. Herbert Selpin, 1941)

A film about the exploits of famed German explorer Dr. Carl Peters. Peters struggles to counter British colonial interests in Africa but is betrayed by Jewish bureaucrats within the German Kaiserreichs administration.

### **Attack on Baku / Anschlag auf Baku** (dir. Fritz Kirchoff, 1940)

In this propagandistic adventure film British agents carry out attacks on oil fields in Baku, Azerbaijan. After creating chaos by inciting the Christian and Muslim population to fight each other, British forces invade the region. A German officer allies with Turkish troops and succeeds in defeating the British.

### **The Golden Spider / Die goldene Spinne** (dir. Erich Engels, 1943)

In this propagandistic espionage thriller Soviet spies try to steal the plans for new German tanks by working undercover in an arms factory. German counter-intelligence succeeds in uncovering the spies.

### **The Great Love / Die Grosse Liebe** (dir. Rolf Hansen, 1942)

The most commercially successful film in the history of the Third Reich. During a leave in Berlin, Lieutenant Paul Wendlandt, a young Luftwaffe pilot, falls for Anna Holberg, a famous singer, who returns his love. But in time of war it is hard to live on love only. The lovers keep being separated on account of Paul's missions and their intended marriage ceremony is constantly postponed. To cap it all, misunderstanding sets in between Paul and Anna. Will they ever become the happy couple they deserve to be?

### **Request Concert / Wunschkonzert** (dir. Eduard von Borsody, 1940)

A melodramatic romance which begins at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin when Inge Wagner falls in love with Luftwaffenleutnant (Airforce Lieutenant) Herbert Koch. They want to marry, but when he receives orders to go to Spain incognito— forbidden to contact any friends or relatives—Inge waits patiently for him.

### **Kolberg** (dir. Veit Harlan, 1945)

During Napoleon's victorious campaign in Germany, the city of Kolberg gets isolated from the retreating Prussian forces. The population of Kolberg refuses to capitulate and organizes resistance against the French army, which immediately submits the city to massive bombardments. Ultimately, and with high casualties, the town's civil resistance led by community leader Nettelbeck leads to the retreat of the French army.

### **I Accuse/ Ich klage an** (dir. Wolfgang Liebeneiner, 1941)

In this morbid Nazi sanctioned pro-euthanasia melodrama, a successful doctor is forced to make a heart wrenching decision after his beautiful young wife is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He "accuses" the existing laws which prevent a merciful death for his wife.

### **The Crew of the Dora / Besatzung Dora** (dir. Karl Ritter, 1943)

In this military propaganda film a fighter bomber unit on a mission to Russia and the African front is forced to land in the desert but eventually manages to return to the homeland – where their wives and fiancées dutifully serve the people's community.

### **Pour le Mérite** (dir. Karl Ritter, 1938)

This Nazi propaganda film chronicles the rise of the German Air Force ("Luftwaffe") from World War I until Adolf Hitler takes power in 1933. A former pilot champions the cause of German remilitarisation against all obstacles by leftist forces in the Weimar Republic.

### **Fronttheater** (dir. Arthur Maria Rabenalt, 1942)

A group of theatre actors travel through German occupied Europe and work tirelessly to entertain the Wehrmacht troops.

### **U-Boat, Westwards! / U-Boote westwärts!** (dir. Günther Rittau, 1941)

This Nazi propaganda film follows the exploits of a German submarine as it prowls the North Atlantic. After torpedoing British destroyers and losing four crew members, the U-Boat victoriously returns home, ready for new deployments.

# FORBIDDEN FILMS

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