

# Diplomacy (2014)

(Diplomatie – German with English subtitles)

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hours 28 min.

Our Content ratings (0-10): Violence 2; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (0-5): 4.5

*When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.*

*Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"*

*"Here I am," he replied.*

*"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*

*Genesis 22:9-12*

Director Volker Schlöndorff plays with history in his adaptation of Cyril Gely's 2011 stageplay. It is August 24, 1944, and General Dietrich von Choltitz, (Niels Arestrup), the German military governor of occupied Paris, has been tasked with the total destruction of Paris. The American troops are at the outskirts of the city and French partisans are sniping at the remaining German troops. Hitler has given the General strict orders to blow everything up in retaliation for the destruction caused in Berlin by Allied bombers. Von Choltitz is supervising the complicated preparations from his plush suite at the Hotel Meurice on the Rue de Rivoli. The German

communication lines are fouled up so that he has to send his personal aide with a radio to the control room a distance away so that he can give the order when the technicians have everything ready.

The plan is to blow up all but one of the bridges, The River Seine will be blocked, causing a massive flood that will swamp a quarter of the city. Thousands of civilians will die as a result, with many more to follow when the second phase is executed—the dynamiting of all of the major buildings and monuments that have made Paris the capital of architectural beauty—the Louvre, the Opera, Notre Dame, The *Arc de Triomphe*, the massive train terminals, and the Eiffel Tower. In case you find this hard to imagine the filmmakers have provided a proper opening: the title and credits are shown over shots of the Nazi destruction of Warsaw accompanied by the majestic but ominous chords of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (the recording used is ironic in that it was made in 1943 with the controversial Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting—controversial because of his alleged complicit support of the Nazis.). Portions of blocks are nothing but rubble; none of the buildings have roofs. A few tall buildings stand, but there is no glass in the windows, nor any roof. Of other buildings all that remains is a wall or two. The camera shows no sign of human life.

The General's subordinates coldly go about their preparation as the General tries to get back the phone connection with Berlin that was broken. The lights go out for a moment, and suddenly there is an intruder in the room. He is the Swedish consul-general Raoul Nordling (Andre Dussollie), who takes his time explaining that he gained entrance to the heavily guarded room through a secret set of doors and stairway designed by Emperor Napoleon III, the suite then being occupied by his mistress. Thus begins a nightlong negotiation to save the City of Lights from destruction.

If you have seen the 1966 film *Is Paris Burning?*, the title taken from the Fuhrer's question to his subordinate in Paris, you know that the meeting between the German and the Swede took place over several days. This film based play's condensation of the negotiations makes the drama more intense, seen as a verbal duel between two strong men with opposing philosophies. The drama is not due to any suspense concerning the outcome—after all, we know that Paris was still standing when the American soldiers marched in. Instead, it is the sparring between the two over the questions—should one always follow orders unquestioningly, or should one's conscience influence one's course of action?

Nordling at first uses moral arguments, but soon switches. His opponent has destroyed numerous cities and carried out his orders to massacre Jews in captured towns. He has lost no sleep over any of this. So, diplomat tries to get the general to look to the future. They both know that Germany is about to lose the war, and the needless destruction of the city will block future relations between the two countries. However, these and other arguments fail to convince the German. We see why when von Cholitz reveals that Hitler signed a special law just before the General came to Paris. The law states that the wife and children of any soldier failing to carry out an order will result in their arrest and execution. Asked, "What would you do?" Dumbfounded, it is a while before the Swede can reply. As one of them says during their interchange, "medieval barbarity" now rules.

People of faith will be intrigued by Nordl's argument inspired by his discovering a copy of an etching of "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (I think it was by Rembrandt). He tries to get von Cholitz to see the parallel with his decision to destroy the world's most beautiful city. Just as no one would want to be a father like Abraham, would he want to be regarded as the father of such an atrocity? Von Cholitz rejects this, but later reintroduces it himself.

As noted earlier, we already know the outcome of their confrontation, so the dramatic interest is in the debate itself. The two main actors are superb, Niels Arestrup conveying the war-weariness of the veteran soldier torn between his love of his family and his duty to his Fuhrer. Andre Dussollie is his equal as the humanitarian willing to assume a great risk, entering into a lion's den on behalf of the thousands whose lives depended upon the decision of one man. The director effectively opens up the stage play, neatly blending at times newsreel shots with staged ones. Even though much of the depiction is fictional, this is a film well worth the effort in seeking it out. You might plan to do what I intend (when my writing pressure lightens up a bit), follow up this film by watching *Is Paris Burning*.

*The full review with discussion questions is in the Dec. 2014 issue of Visual Parables.*