

Generation War (2013)

German with English subtitles; original title Our Mothers, Our Fathers

Rated R. Running time: 4 hour 49 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 7; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

Jeremiah 7:3-7

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:2

This German TV series by writer Stefan Kolditz and director Philipp Kadelbach is set amidst the German invasion of Russia during the years 1941 to 1945. Epic in scope, it focuses upon the lives of five Berliners, all at the beginning of their twenties and (mostly) assured that the future belonged to their Germany. One of them Wilhelm, who narrates the film, says at the start, "We were five, five friends. The whole world lay before us. All we had to do was take it." The

theatrical release is shown in two parts with a short intermission: "A Different Time Part One" and "A Different War, Part Two."

The five young adults consist of two brothers Wilhelm Winter (Volker Bruch), a brave lieutenant favored by their father, and younger brother Friedhelm (Tom Schilling), the poetry lover, in the army only because he has no choice. Charlotte (Miriam Stein) is a Red Cross nurse who has volunteered to go to the new eastern front because that is where the two brothers are being sent. She and Wilhelm are drawn to each other but have not yet openly admitted it. Greta (Katharina Schuttler), a talented and ambitious singer yearns to be the new Marlene Dietrich, but her love for the Jewish tailor Viktor Goldstein (Ludwig Trepke) might be a career buster. All four of the "Aryans" believe that Hitler is leading Germany into a glorious future, and yet they accept Viktor in spite of his heritage. Charlotte, who we see later is infected with anti-Semitism, seems able to compartmentalize her mind in order to accept what their society has declared an outcaste .

On the eve of the brothers' departure for the East they gather in a bar after hours to listen and dance to swing music, despite the posted sign that says "No Swing Music." The festivities abruptly stop when a pair of Gestapo agents, alerted by a neighbor, barge in and confiscate the records.

In Russia Wilhelm finds his gun-shy brother a burden in the squad that he leads, the men coming to despise the overly sensitive young man who would rather read poetry than shoot his rifle. The lieutenant also quickly finds his understanding of "the rules of war" challenged by reality. After a firefight and their capturing three Russians for interrogation, Wilhelm's superior orders him to take out the one who is a commissar and shoot him. In an even more harrowing event, Wilhelm tries to save a little Jewish girl being rounded up by an SS squad. Just when he thinks they have saved the child, the SS major shoots her with his pistol. As the days and weeks

pass-on the screen we are shown the lessening distance to Moscow—shootings of civilians become routine. During this period the men become so upset that Friedhelm has not killed anyone that they beat him severely—with Wilhelm reluctantly standing outside. Although they regard him as a coward, one wonders if those who have killed so many noncombatants also resent his attempt to cling to his moral purity.

Charlotte also is in Russia working with the field hospital, sometimes close enough to the brothers that on occasions they meet. Her first time in surgery she is so inept that Dr. Jahn (Götz Schubert), the surgeon, banishes her to caring for patients and emptying bed pans. Told to choose one of the Russian women who have applied to become assistants, she selects Lilja (Christiane Paul), whom she learns when the woman sets the dislocated shoulder of a soldier, is a doctor. Although she admires her work, when she sees a menorah in one of Lilja's family photographs, she reports her as being a Jew. Later she does try to warn Lilja, whom she has become to respect, but it is too late: the SS have already entered the ward to arrest her.

Back in Berlin Greta begins an affair with a married Gestapo officer Col. Dorn (Mark Waschke) who agrees to further her singing career and also to obtain a passport for Viktor. But when the Nazi sees Viktor and Greta together at a concert theater, he changes plans somewhat, providing the passport, but then secretly arresting the Jew and deporting him to Auschwitz. Greta records a love song that becomes a hit, both in the Fatherland and among the troops in Nazi-occupied Russia.

On the train heading for the death camp a female Polish prisoner has smuggled a knife aboard which she uses to chip away at the wooden floorboard of their cattle car. Viktor and others use coins to help scrape away the splinters. When at last they are able to stomp a hole in the floor, she leads the way by dropping onto the rail bed. Only Viktor summons up the

courage to follow her. They lead a hardscrabble life at the fringes of farms and the forests until they link up with a band of partisans. However, Viktor must keep his Jewish identity a secret because the Poles turn out to be as deadly anti-Semites as the Nazis.

Thus as the war in Russia grinds on, with Wilhelm desperately clinging to his optimism in the Nazi cause, even after their retreat from the gates of Moscow. At the beginning of the film, what seems now like decades ago, Friedhelm had stated that he feared that war would bring out the worst in them. We see this taking place as the Wehrmacht continues to slaughter as many civilians as the SS. Throughout this period (by now we are into Part Two) I recall but one note of criticism of the barbarism: I believe it was voiced by Dr. Jahn during the period the field hospital was operating in the Ukraine. He remarked that once the Ukrainians had welcomed the Germans as liberators, but because the invading Germans had by their belief in Nordic superiority had killed them instead of accepting them, they were now hated.

Wilhelm begins to doubt the invincibility of the German military machine, especially after the disastrous loss at Stalingrad, and the Red Army is now pushing the invaders back toward the Polish border. He is becoming a burnt out case, when during an attack on an enemy position he appears to be killed. Friedhelm is there, so shocked and then enraged by his brother's death, that he dashes out into the open, firing his submachine gun at the defenders. Other Germans follow him so that they manage to capture the building—only to be told to withdraw a short time later as more Russian troops arrive. After this Friedhelm no longer hesitates to fire his gun, whether at soldiers or civilians. By late 1944 and early 1945 the battles have become so grim and dangerous that when new recruits arrive, by now mostly teenagers, Friedhelm and his comrades refuse to learn their names because they assume the inexperienced men will be killed before they can learn how to

stay alive. When one of them asks how he's managed to survive as long as he has, Friedhelm replies, "You resist the temptation to be human." At another point a cold and hungry soldier speaks of God as abandoning them: had he been more biblically literate, he might have understood that this was exactly what the Hebrew prophets had said God would do if the people who professed belief in him were to abandon his ways of justice and love, which clearly the Germans had done.

Wilhelm does wake up from his concussion, but he will find that because of a choice he has made that the roles of himself and his brother are reversed. And back in Berlin the successful Greta, after returning from a tour of the front entertaining the troops, will find her status reversed because of her disillusionment from seeing the actual state of the soldiers is not what the propagandists claim it to be. Charlotte also will change drastically because of the false report that Wilhelm has died. Saving her virginity for the time when they can express their love, she seeks comfort and sexual release from someone close at hand.

All of the above episodes are intercut, back and forth, along with newsreel sequences of German troops advancing against enemy fire. Despite the complexities of the plots, there is little confusion. The battle scenes are often epic in scope, and the firefights and occasional close-quarter fighting as brutal as anything in *Saving Private Ryan*. So also are many of the scenes in the field hospital just as bloody and almost as chaotic as the fight scenes. No wonder the sheltered Greta is horrified and dazed when she is visiting Charlotte during her entertainment tour, and suddenly the hospital is over-run by incoming maimed soldiers.

In some ways, the film might remind Americans of the friends in *The Deer Hunter* who lose their idealism due to the men's horrible war experiences in Vietnam. At their first gathering the five Germans take a selfie, the resulting group photo becoming an icon for each one of them during the next four

years. They had thoughtlessly toasted to their reunion in Berlin by Christmas time, the defeat of the Russians being such a sure thing. It is not until the fifth Christmas that the survivors have an improbable (but for dramatic purposes, excusable) reunion. The scene is as powerful as in the one at the end of the American film, though they do not sing a patriotic song. They have gone through too many horrific experiences to be able to sing. As the subtitle for this part indicates, 1945 is a "different time" from 1941, and the war for glory has become a "different war," a war of guilt and shame, not glory. There is also a jolting discovery after the war when Viktor is trying to discover the whereabouts of Greta, and the man to whom he applies for help turns out to be—well, you can make this discovery for yourself. It is an ironic touch that serves as a fit commentary on what happened amidst the confusion of the Allies restarting German society after the war.

The miniseries was a big hit in Germany, and supposedly aroused a lot of discussion about German complicity in war crimes. The film makes clear that "nice young people" in the regular army also slaughtered innocent people, and not just the brutalized SS goons. Along with *The Book Thief*, the film provides non-Germans with at least a peek into what it was like for Germans to go about their daily lives under Hitler. Perhaps best of all, such films keep us from the dehumanized view of an enemy that we usually assume during wartime. Today some designate as enemies Muslims and gays. As we are reminded by the recent death of the Rev. Fred Phelps who led his pious picketers carrying hate signs at funerals of gays and also soldiers, there are always those who want to dehumanize and regard as "enemy" anyone who is different. We should be thankful that there are filmmakers who want us to see otherwise.

Note: *This film played at a Cincinnati art house theater for just one week. You might have to keep after your public*

library or Netflix to obtain it when released on DVD. You will be well rewarded for such efforts. Also, the full review with discussion questions will be in the April issue of Visual Parables.

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