

DOWNFALL

Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegerl

Produced by Bernd Eichinger

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Having subscribed to a lie, the inevitably bitter consequences provide a second test of character. The first choice concerned the decision to saddle up and ride with Hitler. The second choice is this: *Now that I know this enterprise is a failure, what should I do?* Some killed themselves, and their families. Some fled, hoping to blend in with refugees and escape the wrath of Russia. Some feared the wrath of Hitler; it was familiar and more immediate. These sycophants kept lying to his face, pledging loyalty, just before stealing away into the night.

Some stayed true, even after Hitler was dead. The confusion portrayed in *Downfall* is understandable: Is disloyalty to Hitler disloyalty to Germany? Hitler embodied the Nazi state, but was their nation, still, something more than the sum of its leadership? The lie that Hitler's adjutants succumbed to, ultimately, didn't concern the communists or the Jews or the Aryan 'race.' The lie is voiced by Hitler in the film—compassion is disgraceful. Apes show no mercy, and man should show even less. The lie was a product of Social Darwinism, wrapped in the nationalism of Bismarck. Really, all Hitler is trying to do is justify his lust for power. He had hates, and in a twisted sense he did love Germany. However, many times, particularly in military matters, he did what was wrong for the country rather than admit to a personal failure. He was a great leader, great in the sense that he was persuasive and decisive. Ashamed of their defeat in the Great War, bitter at the terms of their surrender, impoverished by inflation and the Great Depression, a pragmatic, amoral Germany would try anything. They cracked the door for Hitler, and then he kicked it off its hinges.

If the cowering bunker dwellers were in the right, why be afraid? Only because they knew they were wrong did they run, to avoid punishment. Or they lost themselves in debauchery, taking sex and booze over worry and guilt. But what do we make of those who made no sorrowful confessions, but stoically accepted the consequences of their actions? Carrying out orders is no justification for gross offenses. Therefore, these few who didn't hide from themselves, nor from others, are as dead men—healthy flesh, rotting spirit. The full mystery of evil still lay shallow-buried, but many of us are no different than these. We've been spared their ignominy.

But just as Peter and Traudl finally escape the rubble of Berlin, finding refuge in the peace of the country, so must Germany do today:

One, escape the memory; don't let the guilt of the past dictate your future. You were wrong. What's done is done. Make tomorrow better. Don't be a slave to your history.

Two, renounce the wickedness that brought death to 50 millions of your own. It's not so simple as never opening another concentration camp. A democracy's morality is the sum of the character of its people. The government acts in accordance with the prevailing will of the

AN ILLUMINED ILLUSIONS ESSAY BY IAN C. BLOOM

people. And those in the minority can make a stand against the prevailing winds, even if it means being flattened, never to rise again.

For these men no animosity rages, and they exhibit none of the self-loathing that destroys others from within, as a cancer on the spirit. His bravery dedicated to a worthy cause, the man of the minority has a clear conscience, and a hungry nation can feed on his example when it starts over again, assuming it's given another chance.

We don't make up the rules. We don't decide what is just, what is necessary, what is expedient. Hitler thought he was right. So do many others. They just lack the power to impress their nightmares upon the world. The truth is beyond us; it is divine.

Germany's biggest mistake was rejecting God. Paganism filled the void. What fills it now?