

Final Paper  
Film and Literature

***Forgiving the Fuehrer***



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There have been many movies made about the Nazi, the Third Reich<sup>1</sup>, and Adolph Hitler, including *Hitler* (1962), and the semi-documentary/propaganda movie *Triumph des Willens* (1953). Nevertheless one that perhaps is most talked about currently is a version that is brought up from a lot of biography books: *Der Untergang* (2004). Almost all of the biographies were written by Joachim Fest (*The Face of the Third Reich: Portraits of the Nazi Leadership, Hitler, and Inside Hitler's Bunker*), and one is *Until the Final Hour*, a semi autobiography of Hitler's last secretary, Traudl Junge. The movie takes on a part of the latter book which portrays Frau Junge's life when she was chosen to be the Fuehrer's secretary during his last days in the bunker and the final moments of the Third Reich; thus the title of the movie: *Der Untergang* or *Downfall*.

*Der Untergang*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel, is not the typical movie about the leaders of the Third Reich, about how they all seemed to be monsters. Instead, the movie successfully shows that they did have human feelings among them. With its English title, it successfully became well-known throughout the world, and it even got nominated for Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year.

It cannot be denied that this movie undoubtedly has the perfect casts for each role. Each selected actor gave us more than just acting, they take us into an imaginary yet historical world where no World War II movie had ever taken us before. Alexandra Lara starred as Traudl Junge, Ulrich Matthes portrayed the perfect Goebbels (right to the scary face), and the famous Juliane Kohler to play the even more famous Eva Braun. But of course, the highlight of the cast goes to a well-known Swiss actor, Bruno Ganz, who portrayed Hitler himself. Conducted many researches to get to know Hitler, including

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<sup>1</sup> *Reich* is German for "empire." Adolph Hitler believed that he was creating a third German empire, a successor to the Holy Roman Empire and the German empire formed by Chancellor Bismarck in the nineteenth century.

studying a propaganda film which was made back in the 40s, he did a perfect job in portraying the furious Fuehrer while at the same time showing that Hitler actually had a human side.

Unlike the book which starts with a brief description about Junge's childhood, the movie immediately starts with a scene where Junge and several other women were brought to the Berlin Bunker where Hitler and his comrades were hiding, and tested to be his secretary. Junge was terribly nervous, and as does anybody who's nervous would do, she made a mistake when she was asked to type. The Fuehrer, the cold dictator, the person who always kills his men who mess up, responded to this by smiling ever so gently and told her to restart the typing. Not long after that, she got out of the room with an announcement that she had been accepted to be his new secretary; and that scene...is just a beginning where it all gets more and more interesting.

During his last days in the Berlin Bunker, according to Traudl Junge, Joachim Fest, and the movie, Adolph Hitler was losing his powers as a leader. Somehow his most trusted men in the military and government turned against him and his vision of one socialist nation. Perhaps it was because of his Parkinson's disease, his high, explosive temper, or the fear of getting killed by the Russians, some of his generals and ministers betrayed him by either leaving Berlin, or making arrangements with the Allied Forces. Sadly, if anybody didn't notice this sudden and subtle coup d'etat, it is Hitler himself. Even the secretaries like Frau Junge and few others knew that the generals are just sucking up to Hitler so they would be permitted to leave Berlin to save them selves.

To the men he work with and trust, Adolph always had great respect and compassion. One of them is Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS or *Schutzstaffel*<sup>2</sup>, the Fuehrer's golden boy. It can be said that he was second in power to Hitler; he was even the leading man to oversee the Holocaust. Hitler cared so much about Himmler. In a particular scene of the movie, on Hitler's last birthday, Himmler suggested that the Fuehrer leave Berlin and face the Allied Forces with politics rather than using military forces. Of course, Hitler immediately know that Himmler himself wanted to leave Berlin so he could be safe. As if he was a saint and not a dictator, Hitler said, "It's okay, my dear Himmler. My loyal Heinrich. It's okay...go now." That night, Heinrich Himmler and his staff left Berlin with an agenda of negotiating with Dwight Eisenhower, "Should I give Eisenhower the Nazi salute or shake his hand?"

Supposedly, one's birthday must be celebrated with good things. Apparently, it was not so for Hitler. Other than the fact that his golden boy, Himmler, left him in Berlin and planned to betray him, the day started with quite a few fireworks; and by fireworks, I mean 'artillery'. At the time, the Russian army was getting very close to Berlin and the Allied Forces was using air force. On preceding conflicts, Hitler had always been proud of the German air force; specifically to Hermann Goering, also one of his most trusted men. He was so trusted that Hitler himself gave him three titles to take: 1) air minister of Germany 2) prime minister, and 3) interior minister of Prussia. Surely in the most normal occurrences that kind of trust must be returned by giving respect and loyalty.

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<sup>2</sup> Schutzstaffel or 'defense squadron'. Special police force in Nazi Germany founded as a personal bodyguard for Adolph Hitler in 1925; the SS administered the concentration camps.

Unfortunately, when the Red Army<sup>3</sup> was approaching Berlin with its air force, nobody informed the Fuehrer; he had to ask his men who are outside Berlin which were as clueless as he was. Where was Goering this time? According to history (and later in the movie), 3 days after Hitler's birthday, on April 23 1945, he sent a telegram to Hitler stating that if Hitler wasn't going to respond by 10pm the same day, he (Goering) would take the power into his own hands as the Reich's leader. Of course, upon the Fuehrer's request, Goering was later sentenced to death<sup>4</sup>.

There is a speculation which is most probable be the reason why these treasons happened; however, it's very much related to past events before the Fuehrerbunker. It is important to know that even before Hitler was forced to enter the Berlin Bunker, an assassination attempt was targeted on him by one of his colonels, Claus von Stauffenberg<sup>5</sup>. After that incident, Adolph Hitler became somewhat mentally disturbed as he turn into a frustrated, temperamental, and paranoid personality. To put the cherry on top, this personal emotional rollercoaster was worsened by his physical deterioration. Because of the assassination attempt, Hitler was hurt (physically) and his Parkinson's disease became direr, and this is seen by the high-ranking officers of the Reich as jeopardy to the continuity of the Third Reich.

Needless to say, if 2 of Hitler's confidants dared to deceive him, there must be others who think the same. Hermann Fegelein was one of the others. He was married to the sister of Eva Braun (with whom Hitler's had a long time love relationship) yet he

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<sup>3</sup> The short form **Red Army** refer to the **Workers' and Peasants' Red Army**, the armed forces first organized by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War in 1918 "Red" refers to the blood shed by the working class in its struggle against capitalism.

<sup>4</sup> After he was convicted and sentenced to death at the Nuremberg trials (1946), he avoided execution by committing suicide in his cell.

<sup>5</sup> Von Stauffenberg escaped the blast but was captured and executed the same day.

dared to spread rumors and exaggerated truths about the declining of Hitler's leadership. He was the adjutant of Heinrich Himmler, so in the early parts of the movie, he was much seen with Himmler while he was setting up plan to negotiate with the west. Indeed, he wanted safety for himself, so he tried everything to convince Hitler to retreat and get out of Berlin. He tried suggesting it to Hitler himself, he tried manipulating the secretaries to leave the bunker while they can, manipulating the generals, and of course, he approached Eva Braun to somehow convince Hitler to leave Berlin while he can.

One specific thing about this movie is how it affects the people who see it. The very people who once thought of him to be the cruelest of evils may have a different opinion about the Fuehrer after watching the movie. Why? Well, that one scene between Hitler and the 22-year-old Traudl Junge above is one of the reasons why. Other than that, there are some other scenes that may help us to comprehend the human side of Adolph Hitler.

First of all, you would think that the people mid-tricked by Fegelein would fall for his lies and tell the Fuehrer to retreat. But no...oddly enough, if it's not heart wrenching, it seems that whoever was left in the bunker, in Berlin, was more than willing to be stuck inside the ground zero than to be in the outside world. It may be because they "have pledged our allegiances to Hitler," as the generals have said; however, it seemed that they also had strong faith for Hitler's efforts and words. For example, the first time Fegelein suggested Hitler to leave Berlin; he wanted Eva Braun to say something with him. Rather than giving a support to his brother-in-law, Eva Braun replied, "He's the Fuehrer. He knows what's right." The same goes to when Fegelein tried to scare the secretaries away; although they had had their doubts, they didn't believe 100% in Fegelein. Albert Speer,

an architect with whom Hitler had designed his Third Reich metropolis supported Hitler to stay in Berlin, "you must be on stage when the curtain falls." Surely this tells us that the people around Hitler believed in him and his vision of a socialist nation and it can only happen if one also has great faith in himself.

Right before he committed suicide, Hitler once said, "morgen werden mich millionen verfluchen aber das schicksal wollte es nicht anders," or 'tomorrow, millions of people will condemn me but the fate wanted it so'. He believed that his vision of creating a nation which upholds equality, where no man shall ever have a private commercial property will indeed change the world into a better one. It is very unfortunate that he had tried to do it in the less good way. His words show us that he has no regret of he's done because it has been written in his path of life, and a lot of people actually admire him for this. For example, there is a fictitious character in the movie named Peter Kranz, a young boy who successfully shot 2 Russian tanks with a bazooka. He and some other children were joined in the Berlin Hitler's Youth, convinced they are able to defend Berlin from downfall. Why? Because they knew Hitler believed they would've won the war. For quite some time in the Fuehrerbunker Hitler too, believed that Berlin could be saved.

Although he had declared that he doesn't believe in compassion, many people believed in and loved Hitler. They became his fanatics. This is completely understandable, because as what Traudl Junge had described in her memoirs, and also from the scenes in the movie, Hitler, although seemed like a megalomaniac, deep down he's just a man with dreams. Perhaps almost the same as Martin Luther King's: a world of equality. Only, the two of them handled things differently. But still, there's nothing wrong with fighting for our dreams; most of today's hero started by dreaming.

Another reason why Hitler was worth people's worship is because he was a dedicated leader. Although he had never attended a military academy, he managed to conquer most of Europe by himself. He was ruthless. He didn't believe there are civilians in war. Later in the movie, near his end of life, as he appoints General Von Greim to replace Goering as the new General-Fieldmarshall, he gave him advice.

*Be ruthless. Life doesn't forgive weakness. This so-called humanity is religious drivel. Compassion is an eternal sin. To feel compassion for the weak is a betrayal of nature. The strong can only triumph if the weak are exterminated. Being loyal to this law, I've never had compassion. I've always been ruthless when faced with internal opposition from other races. That's the only way to deal with it.*

Still, it doesn't mean that Hitler is a cold-blooded person, and different from what people have been saying through the years, it doesn't mean he's the devil himself. The truth is Adolph Hitler is known to be ruthless only when he is faced with something that concerns the welfare of his country. But at other times, no. We can see that in the movie whenever he is involved in a non-political conversation with Eva and the secretaries, he acted normally. In Traudl Junge's biography, even, it is mentioned that Hitler used to send most all the things he get for his birthday to hospitals, children's homes, old folk's homes, and welfare organizations, except a few presents that were handmade and sent by children to him.

As the movie continues, each character that chose to stay in the bunker was proven to be loyal followers of Hitler. An ideal example is Joseph Goebbels with his wife and children who loved Hitler with all their hearts. Goebbels had been Hitler's propaganda minister since the day Hitler started the Third Reich. Goebbels's policy was based on the notion that a lie, repeated often and forcibly, gains the legitimacy of truth, and with that very notion, he exploited the German media to launch propaganda against

the Jews and other groups. He also followed his Fuehrer's way of thinking about separating between private and political matters:

*I feel no sympathy. I repeat, I feel no sympathy! The German people chose their fate. That may surprise some people. Don't fool yourself. We didn't force the German people. They gave us a mandate, and now their little throats are being cut!*

And just like Hitler, Goebbels turned 180° when it comes to non-political issues. As frightening as he was, Goebbels' children loved him very much and he loved them back.

Goebbels was always on Hitler's side every time he had a meeting with the generals, and whenever the generals would disagree with Hitler, it is his job to calm both sides down and paraphrase anything that needed to be paraphrased until both Hitler and the generals are satisfied with the decision. Usually this doesn't take long because with his high intelligence of mass psychology, in one scene of the movie, when Hitler and the generals were in some sort of quarrel, it took him only one sentence to calm the mob down.

Goebbels and his wife were dedicated fanatics of Hitler that they moved into the bunker with Hitler and refused to come back outside if without the Fuehrer. When their mansion was bombed, Magda Goebbels took the Goebbels children into the bunker. Surprisingly, the film makers did an amazing job in telling us one quality no one could've ever guessed Hitler had: he loved children, and children loved him. There was a scene when the Goebbels children couldn't wait to meet their 'Uncle Hitler' as soon as they arrived at the bunker and sang him a song. A wake up call, perhaps? Maybe Hitler wasn't as monstrous as we think he was; especially, in my opinion, children have much better judgment towards other people.

Not only did he was loved by the children, he loved children as well. Though the movie never included this, in the book Traudl Junge recalled one of her conversations with Hitler. She asked him why he wouldn't go out from Berlin by wearing a disguise so he won't get assassinated. He said no, of course, because he thought he was too well-known that his voice would've given him away; but the real surprise to Frau Junge was his next sentence, "I've never feared assassination when driving through the crowds In my car – at the worst I've been afraid it might knock down a child." In addition, in the movie when he honored 12-year-old Peter Kranz for his courageous act, Hitler pinched the boy's left cheek. Everybody knows he was a vegetarian, but who would've thought he was part of the Disney clan?

Was the man we knew as a monster really was a monster? After watching the movie and reading some of the books, I changed my mind. I personally don't think so. He may have had the most awful-looking haircut I've ever seen, but even the Beast had a chance in love with Belle. In fact, Hitler's love affair perhaps is much stronger than the Beauty and the Beast because of a number of reasons. Eva Braun and Hitler met for the first time when Eva was still 17. She was working as an assistant to Nazi's official photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann, and according to the letters she sent to her sister in Bavaria, Eva admitted she immediately fell in love the moment Hitler walked into Hoffmann's store. Soon after that she became his mistress, although at the time Hitler was already *mistress-ing* someone else. It is rumored that the previous mistress committed suicide because she felt Hitler was distracted by Eva; although some people also believed that she was murdered because Hitler wanted to be with Eva Braun.

Although it is never mentioned in the movie, according to Traudl Junge, Eva Braun was occasionally dismissed by Hitler from open forums which involved important staffs. Traudl Junge herself felt that Eva was being humiliated – she was sometimes shouted at, that she didn't have the courage to step outside her room in the bunker too often. Albert Speer recalled in one of his comments that,

*Eva Braun was allowed to be present during visits from old party associates. She was banished as soon as other dignitaries of the Reich, such as cabinet ministers, appeared at the table...Hitler obviously regarded her as socially acceptable only within strict limits. Sometimes I kept her company in her exile, a room next to Hitler's bedroom. She was so intimidated that she did not dare leave the house for a walk. Out of sympathy for her predicament I soon began to feel a liking for this unhappy woman, who was so deeply attached to Hitler.*

It is mostly because of Eva Braun's lack of education that Hitler kept her away from important events, which is understandable because he would be risking his Third Reich if ever Eva Braun said something inappropriate and out of context in front of the people who looked up to him. However, it's not always like that. According to internet sources<sup>6</sup>, Hitler and Eva shared deep understanding and compassion towards each other (although Hitler claimed he had never believed in compassion). Right after the Stauffenberg bombing incident, Adolph Hitler sent a letter to his mistress:

*Mein Liebes Tschapperl,  
Don't worry about me. I'm fine though perhaps a little tired. I hope to come home soon and then I can rest in your arms. I have a great longing for rest, but my duty to the German people comes before everything else. ... I am very proud of the honor - please tell them that - to possess the love of girl who comes from such a distinguished family. I have sent to you the uniform I was wearing during the unfortunate day. It is proof that Providence has protected me and that we have nothing more to fear from our enemies.*

*From my whole heart, your A.H.*

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.shoah.dk/Braun/Letter.htm>, accessed June 6, 2006, 07.46 AM

As a reply to the letter, Eva Braun sent him a letter right back which shows a deep concern and love for her “A.H.”

*Geliebter,*

*I am beside myself. I am dying of anxiety now that I know you are in danger.*

*Come back as soon as possible. I feel as if I am going insane.*

*The weather is beautiful here and everything seems so peaceful that I am ashamed of myself ... You know I have always told you that I would die if anything happened to you. From our first meeting on, I have promised myself to follow you wherever you go, even to death. You know that I live only for your love.*

*Your Eva.*

The dramatization of this relationship is presented quite beautifully in the movie. Eva Braun was constantly supporting the Fuehrer for whatever it is he was doing, no matter how crazy it seemed, how shaky his left hand was, or even when the whole hallucination syndrome took over Hitler’s objective views. She was the only one who could calm Hitler down.

One of the most memorable moments for me watching the movie is when Hitler found out that the whole high-ranking officers in his military had been lying to him about General Steiner’s army. All this time in the bunker he believed that General Steiner’s men would come and successfully defend Berlin from its downfall. He kept sending out orders through the rest of the military but without him knowing it, they didn’t pass the message to Steiner because nobody at that point knew where he and his army was. Instead of telling Hitler the truth, they kept feeding him with lies. It’s a shame, however, that no one is as good with propaganda as Goebbels was that eventually Hitler found out. What’s really touching is that although he was upset and furious to the traitors, he was more disappointed to himself, “how can I be a leader under these circumstances?”

In the movie, when Hitler found out, he yelled to the generals in front of him while the rest of the bunker's inhabitants listened outside his office. Actually this is the first time Hitler had ever showed tears, and it was heart-breaking, really, to see how Hitler had lost all his hopes in just 5 minutes after being lied to for nearly a week. Right about then he knew that Berlin had lost the battle. Shortly after that Hitler stepped outside the office and head back to his room watched by the people who had been standing there listening. One of them is Eva Braun. Normally he didn't show private affections towards Braun, but in this scene, after Eva said, "You know I'll stay with you. You can't send me away," he reached for her and kissed her in front of all the men watching. Who knew Hitler was a loving character? On top of it all, I give numerous credits to Eva Braun who stood by Hitler even though he had never had a decent hairstyle.

As the movie reaches its end, as does Hitler reaches his, we can see how far the word 'loyalty' can get. When Hitler told his secretaries to catch a plane that would bring them to safety, Traudl Junge and Gerda Christian decided that they would stay as long as they're needed. Even though they didn't commit suicide, there was a moment I thought at least one of them would, because they both already asked the Fuehrer whether or not they could get the cyanide capsule in case they needed to die.

Eva Braun, the number one woman in Hitler's life wanted her death to be painless. She also mentioned that she would like to die pretty, so there is a scene in the movie when she glanced in the mirror, put on her lipstick, and then tried to smile. Heart breaking. How could one smile knowing her life would soon be ended by herself?

A brief moment before, an ordained minister was sent to the bunker to conduct the brief civil wedding ceremony between Eva and Hitler; therefore, when they

committed their suicides, she had already married Hitler. After Blondi, Hitler's dog, was put down to sleep; it was the lovers' time to be dead. Eva Braun killed herself as planned, by taking the cyanide capsule, while Adolph Hitler, after consulting with a doctor on which is quicker: cyanide or gunfire to his head, killed himself by doing both ways. As he bit the capsule, he shot himself on the head. Afterward, their bodies were taken outside and burned as Hitler had requested so the enemy would not be able to retrieve his body.

Goebbels and his family also proved their loyalty. The moment Hitler found out that there were no hopes left for Berlin, Goebbels knew that this was his time to die. And although shown only briefly in the movie, Magda Goebbels may be the most determined woman in it, second to Eva Braun. As I have said, the Goebbels had so much faith for the National Socialism in Hitler's vision, so that when it was certain that Hitler could never win the battle, in a conversation with Albert Speer, Magda Goebbels refused to stay alive in the world with no Hitler, "I thought about it. My children cannot grow up in a world without National Socialism. If National Socialism dies, there will be no future." Moreover, after the Fuehrer bid everyone in the bunker goodbye, Magda Goebbels, the woman who, most of the time, was usually calm and confident, became hysterical, went to his chamber and begged Hitler to stay alive.

Her husband, Goebbels, although seemed very cool on the outside, loved Hitler very much that when he was asked to leave Berlin by Hitler, he cried to Traudl Junge:

*Imagine! The Fuehrer wants me to leave Berlin. He ordered me to leave. I've never ignored an order from the Fuehrer. Never! But I will not obey this order. I'll stay with the Fuehrer.*

Goebbels admired his Fuehrer so much that he cried because the Fuehrer wanted him to stay alive rather than be dead with him. After Hitler and Eva Braun's bodies were cremated, it was time for the rest of the men down in the bunker, including the Goebbels'

to kill themselves. To take it to the next level, although Magda and he already planned to commit suicide together, they both also made their children commit assisted suicide by mixing drugs into a drink and had their 6 children to drink it down so they would fall asleep. Once they're asleep, Magda returns to their room and made them bit the cyanide capsules. After it was all done, Joseph Goebbels and his wife went outside the bunker and committed suicide by shooting themselves.

Watching a movie about Adolph Hitler, the notorious German dictator, means that we cannot escape what we've been told to know about the history of the Nazi. It means knowing that Adolph Hitler is claimed to be the one responsible to the invasions to European countries, and of course, the genocide of the Jews back in the 1930s. It also means that we expect the worst from this man for that's all we've ever known from him: the worst. It is really interesting to see a movie which was made by Germans, instead of movies made by Hollywood, and since this movie is, so far, the most faithful to history because it is taken out of someone's biography, it is important to note that the movie is based on no one's judgments; rather, it is a movie made based on numbers of people who actually lived through the events. History books that we have learned had been written by those who won the war; thus, bad image of Hitler can be found anywhere in the world, from books, TV shows, to cartoons<sup>7</sup>. However, I found that after seeing this movie a lot of people started to somewhat change their impression towards Hitler. Could it be that this is actually the main purpose of the movie? To change people's minds? To forgive Hitler? Did it really work?

Maybe.

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<sup>7</sup> In one of its comics, the all-American hero, Captain America, fought the Nazis, came face to face with Hitler, and defeated them.

Let's not forget that the movie is shown all over the world, including Israel. From what I've gathered in the internet – some denied it – but some views about Hitler changed. Perhaps Hitler wasn't the devil after all. Perhaps he just had evil in his soul, just like everybody else. Seeing the movie, it's no wonder reasonable doubts started to come in the minds of people who've watched it. If Hitler was really that cruel, would children actually love him? Would Eva Braun stand by him for as long as she could? Could it be that Hitler only wanted what's best for his country but got misled by his men? After all, in his political testament, he did say, "...In those three decades, all my thoughts, actions, and my life were dictated by my love for and loyalty to the German people."

When asked about whether or not this movie is to play down the guilt of the German people, Joachim Fest, the author of the other book which was also used as the base for this movie stated,

*You could go on all day about these feelings of guilt, overdoing it, I'd say. I'm German and sick of hearing about it. I still hear people say that the Germans ought to feel guiltier about what happened under the Nazis. But even if I admit that Nazism was a German phenomenon, the question applies to the whole of Europe, as in 1933 and the years that followed, no one, for various reasons, was able to prevent this madness spreading. The lack of attention paid to questions of guilt – of which the German people are accused – is a smokescreen behind which European intellectuals conceal the responsibility of the other nations.*

On the other hand, Traudl Junge in her foreword for the book 'Until the Final Hour' said,

*This book is neither a retrospective justification nor a self-indictment. I do not want it to be read as a confession either...It does not ask my readers for understanding, but it will help them to understand.*

So which is it? Is it a film to defend the pride of German people, or just a movie created to 'tell it like it is'?

You can be the judge. Just remember to keep an open mind. Looks like the debate is going to last forever.

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