

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Untertan

Credits:

Director: Wolfgang Staudte
Cast: Werner Peters, Blandine Ebinger, Friedrich Richter,
Paul Esser, Renate Fischer, Sabine Thalbach
Script: Wolfgang Staudte, Fritz Staudte (Based on the novel by
Heinrich Mann published 1918)
Produced: Defa, Potsdam, DDR (East-Germany), 1951
Length: 108 Minutes

Précis – Karl Moehlmann

“Wer treten wollte, musste sich treten lassen.”

Heinrich Mann's novel, written between 1911 and 1914, is one of the most important satires of the Wilhelminian

era. The biography of **Diederich Heßling** and his career in the authoritarian state is the harshest critique of nationalistic power politics written during the reign of Wilhelm II. Kurt Tucholsky called it the “Herbarium of the German Man” and the “Anatomic Atlas of the Empire.” Although censored in 1914, it enjoyed a sensational success after World War I.

Diederich Heßling is portrayed in a double role as subject and tyrant. Heinrich Mann captures with psychological acuity the effects of living within the institutional power of the **Wilhelminian authoritarian state** (“**Obrigkeitsstaat**”) whether in school, university, fraternity or the military. The net result of this experience engenders in a prototypical subject such as Diederich a sense of belonging and personal power. He treats the people under him in the same manner as the state treats its citizens.

“He who wanted to kick had to be kicked first.”

In school, he learns patriotic songs and obedience and denounces a fellow student to the authorities. At the university, he enters the fraternity “*Neuteutonia*”, where he becomes part of the nationalistic environment and the drinking and foil fighting traditions that regard the dueling scar or “*Schmiß*” as a sign of honor and bravery. Ironically, Diederich never finishes his military service. A doctor had diagnosed him with flat feet and he is thus given an early discharge on this basis.

When Diederich is finished with his studies, he returns to Netzig and takes over management of his father's paper factory. In keeping with the “*Obrigkeits*” sensibility he has internalized, he behaves like an arrogant tyrant towards the workers and punishes criticism with dismissal. In the city hall restaurant, he provokes his competitor, the factory owner **Lauer**, to make a critical statement about “*Jewish blood*” in German noble families, including the royal one. Lauer is sued for insulting his majesty, the emperor, and has to appear in court.

Diederich is thus the janus faced human coin in which we see both utter obsequiousness and subordination to the state above him and a ruthless exercise of his power over

the employees beneath him. In **Wolfgang Buck** and his father we see Diederich's counterparts. They personify the liberal middle class which believed in the principles of freedom and democracy but found itself in a state of decline and retreat after the defeat in the democratic revolution of 1848.

The middle class like Diederich, therefore, had to renege on its own political interests and principles and pay the price of subordination in order to participate in and reap the benefits of the authoritarian state. The result is a caricature, a distortion of a proud citizen, a scarred face like Diederich's.

As a director, Wolfgang Staudte uses cabaretistic effects. The camera perspective is often deliberately and extremely artificial. Diederich's fellow students at the fraternity "*Teutonia*" are filmed through beer glasses so that their faces become monstrously distorted. Perhaps Staudte's most memorable effect in this regard is the camera angle employed when Diederich sees the German Emperor in Rome. The camera looks down from the Emperor's carriage onto Diederich. The latter runs next to the vehicle and continuously indulges in a deep, devout bow as a greeting to the Kaiser. In still another scene, when a captain yells at Diederich during his military service, Staudte abruptly cuts to a close-up of the yelling mouth, inducing the impression of an explosion.

When Staudte turned the novel into a movie he faithfully followed the historical framework of the original but didn't hide his own historic perspective. The novel ends with the inauguration of the memorial to Wilhelm I and the big apocalyptic storm that approaches. It leaves him standing alone in front of the emperor in bronze and gives a foreshadow of the chaos and destruction of World War I and the end of the Wilhemenian era. By adding the scene of the total destruction of the town at the end of World War II, Staudte connects the spirit of the Wilhelmenian era and its subjects directly to the Third Reich.

Is there a prophetic dimension in this character? Was the spirit of Diederich, his synergistic melding of obsequiousness to those above and brutal arrogance to

those below bequeathed as the legacy of the Wilhelmine era to the Nazi era? And if so, was this spirit a prerequisite of the Nazi dictatorship?

Biography

Wolfgang Georg Friedrich Staudte's remarkable 50 plus year career included work as an actor during the Weimar era, as actor and director during the Third Reich, as director for DEFA in the DDR, and finally as one of the most successful television directors in West Germany during the 1970s.

Because he had participated in political oriented plays in regional theater productions, the Nazis prohibited him from acting anymore on the stage. Because of this, between 1934 and 1940 Staudte turned to making commercials on radio, producing advertising films and doing voiceover and dubbing work. He also directed his first short, ***Jeder hat mal Glück*** during this period. In order to revive his acting career, during the war Staudte appeared occasionally in propaganda films.

By this time he had also made something of a name for himself through his direction of advertising pieces and short films. This helped get him classified as indispensable to the film industry, and kept him from going to the front. During the war years, Staudte began to make feature length films. But once again, in 1944, with the filming of ***Der Mann, dem man den Namen stahl***, Staudte fell out of favor with the authorities.

In 1946 Staudte produced and directed ***Die Mörder sind unter uns*** for DEFA. It was the first film made by a German in postwar Germany. With the filming of ***Der Untertan*** in 1951, Staudte was acknowledged as one of the leading German directors and began to receive international recognition as well. In 1955 Staudte broke off work on *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* after quarreling with **Berthold Brecht**, and in 1956 he moved to West Berlin.

Staudte enjoyed considerable success throughout the fifties and into the mid sixties. His biggest success in West Germany is usually considered to have been the political satire *Rosen für den Staatsanwalt*, but by the late sixties he had fallen into financial difficulties, having financed several of his own films, and after 1968, with a few exceptions, he worked almost exclusively in television productions. He continued to occasionally participate in dubbing work, as for instance when he did so for **Stanley Kubrick's** *A Clockwork Orange* in 1972. Staudte continued to work in production and directing into his seventies, and was actually on location in Yugoslavia when he died in January of 1984.