

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Des Teufels General

Director: Helmut Käutner
Script: Helmut Käutner, George Hurdalek (based on the play by Carl Zuckmayer)
Producer: Gyula Trebitsch, Richard Gorden
Production Year: 1955
Cinematography: Albert Benitz
Cast: Curd Jürgens (General Harry Harras); Marianne Koch (Dorothea Geiss); Karl John (Karl Oderbruch); Harry Meyen (Lt. Hartmann)

“Get thee behind me, Leviathan...”

Allen Krumm

In 1941, *Generalluftzeugmeister* Ernst Udet grappled with what some have termed the ultimate philosophical question and answered in the affirmative. Or perhaps Hermann Göring sent him a note with the suggested answer. No one is sure. In any case, he was done in by death. In the late forties, while living in Vermont, Carl Zuckmayer wrote a play loosely based on his friend Udet called **Des Teufels General**.

The play was very successful in Germany in the 1950s. From the play came the movie and, if a film can be said to possess a virtual *Weltanschauung*, then in **Des Teufels General** it surely resides in the protagonist's weary disgust with state worship and war glorification. General Harry Harras is a kindred spirit of Hemingway's hero in “A Farewell to Arms”. He is through with war. But unfortunately, war is not through with General Harras. His own *Lebenslauf* has entangled him in the system. A flying ace in World War I, aircraft – flying, fighting with and making them – have become his life.

As he says, “Nowhere else would I have had such an opportunity.” This *ich muss meine Karriere machen* refrain – a familiar melody – makes one think immediately of the war era's Albert Speer and Werner von Braun. One thinks also of luminaries, such as “Blood and Guts” Patton and Butcher Harris, and then there are *Machthaber* and politicians of more recent vintage.

General Harry Harras lives and moves in a world somehow strangely familiar. A war brought on by lies and ideology, a war in which he does not believe, is being waged, and unfortunately, he is a part of it. He endures an excess of vulgar propaganda encouraging blind nationalism in support of the war.

He works with a veritable ensemble of war enablers, types who recur with dismayingly regularity throughout history: bloodthirsty ethnologists driven by their machiavellian convictions and passionate attachments who believe upping the ante in war is always the solution; true believers held up by their scaffolding of invincible ignorance; head in the sand careerists steeled by their self absorption; and an assortment of toadies and opportunists (including, in Harry's case, one very lovely one) looking for their main chance.

And then there is Harry, who is much like many folks – angry, enervated by a creeping sense of doom, befuddled as to what to do to stop the

madness, and prone to burying himself in his own responsibilities and concerns. YouTube has not yet been imagined, but the totalitarian state has made considerable inroads into the private sphere, and Harry is being electronically surveiled.

Since the war is going badly, the administration Harry serves (in accord with the mentality of another notable war administration) decides the solution is to go to war with yet another country. Meanwhile, to encourage him, the SS arrests him (apparently for lacking sufficient *Übereifrigkeit*) without charges and without bail. The real problem is that his planes aren't working very well. The SS has taken on the task of finding out why. It can be only incompetence or sabotage, and neither answer bodes well for Harry.

He is isolated, subjugated to a personalized psych-ops campaign that would elicit murmurs of approval from the KGB and the CIA, and in a culminating, Dostoevskian ruse made to think he is going to be shot. This campaign is waged in the apparent belief that all of this will turn him into an enthusiastic *Parteigenosse*. Unlike most citizens, Harry is neither converted nor cowed.

Harry is immune to the psychological abuse meted out to him due to the tightly bundled components of the composite *summum bonum* he has worked out - friendship and decency and having something to live for as opposed to having something to die for. All of this is of course interspersed with occasional bouts of drinking and women.

He soliloquizes passionately about these things in a decidedly dissident pep talk to young, recently jilted Lt. Hartmann. The latter wants to return to the war and die fighting. Harry assures him that this is nonsense. Neither controlling nation states nor controlling women are worth much devotion, let alone a last full measure.

Notwithstanding his clubbable qualities, Harry remains enmeshed in the system, which means he needs to find out why his planes are behaving like rocks. In the concluding scenes of the story, Harry and his *rechte Hand Ingenieur Oderbruch* engage in some hair raising test flying and some soul searching dialogue which synergize to provide the moral *Schwerpunkt* of the narrative. Ingenieur Oderbruch helps him to grasp the technical dynamics of slippery slopes, and armed with this timely calibration of his moral compass, Harry is able to find his own ultimate answer to that vexingly ultimate philosophical question.

Both the play and the movie were among the first attempts by artists to deal openly with the Nazi period, focusing in particular on the corrosive

effect such a regime has on its own citizens. The trajectory and denouement of Ernst Udet's life and career was much more prominent but not in the least more unique than the lives of many of his contemporaries.

Every person, in particular the *Prominente*, who awoke into the totalitarian state of the Third Reich had to decide what to do – some went into inner exile, some went into outer exile, some dragged their feet, some fell into step, some bridled their brains, and some blew their brains out.

Each of the principal creative figures (playwright Zuckmayer, director Käutner, actor Jürgens) were confronted by this spectrum of choices. Zuckmayer was expatriated, forced to leave Austria after the *Anschluss*. Helmut Käutner and Curd Jürgens remained for the duration of the Third Reich.

Käutner made movies right through the war, concentrating on apolitical comedies and romances (**Kleider machen Leute; Auf Wiedersehen, Franziska; Romance in Moll; Unter den Brücken**). In retrospect, it is clear that Käutner had considerable insight into the nature of the Nazi regime, but he kept his outlook carefully under wraps. Jürgens was not quite so circumspect and was incarcerated in a concentration camp for political unreliability in 1944.

General Harry's old friend Olivia gets it right when she tartly informs him: "You think you are playing with them, but they are playing with you." She is right. That is the way it is when a government gains too much power. You play with them, they play with you, and finally they just play you. But we should note that Harry's government tried to get it right as well. They planned to give Harry a state funeral, since he died in the line of duty.