

Downfall 2004/Certificate 15

Synopsis of the film

Downfall tells the fictional account of Hitler's last two weeks in power, through an all German cast (in German with English subtitles). It is mainly set in the *Fuhrerbunker*, Hitler's secret underground fortress in Berlin and is told through the eyes of Traudl Junge who had been one of Hitler's personal secretaries since 1942. With Soviet troops gaining territory and encircling Berlin the story focuses on Hitler's choice to stay in the capital and the film portrays his descent into denial and paranoia through a number of highly-charged outbursts.

We learn about Eva Braun's relationship with Hitler and her attempts to maintain this relationship – she says at one point during the film that Hitler shows more affection to his dog than to her. We learn about the high-ranking officers who betrayed Hitler – notably Heinrich Himmler, who took de facto control of the Reich citing Hitler's failing health and offered surrender terms to the allies. The film also follows the story of Joseph Goebbels and his family. His wife, Magda says more than once that she does not want her young family to grow up in a world without National Socialism, and she kills each of her children with cyanide capsules before killing herself.

The film also follows Professor Schenk, a doctor in the SS who appears more concerned than most with the wellbeing of those left in Berlin and risks his life in order to help the wounded. We also see the tragic story of a young boy unfold as he fights the Soviet troops on the streets of Berlin.

The film is topped and tailed by an interview with Traudl Junge in old age, who is still seemingly trying to come to terms with her part in the story.

When it was made and where

The screenplay was written by Bernd Eichinger and was based upon a number of books including the memoirs of Traudl Junge. It was filmed in Bavaria Filmstudios, Munich, Berlin and St Petersburg, Russia, and released in 2004.

HMDT Review

Please note that this review may act as a spoiler for the film.

We are recommending this film as it gives an interesting account of Hitler's last days in power and the destruction of the Third Reich. The film conveys the mental state of high-ranking Nazi officials in a personal but also unsympathetic manner. The brilliant acting (particularly Bruno Ganz's Hitler) gives the viewer a real sense of the claustrophobic atmosphere of the *Fuhrerbunker* and the lengths Hitler's most trusted generals would go to preserve the Reich and serve their Fuhrer, even if they disagreed with his decisions.

One of the most engaging and disturbing themes running through the film is the contempt Hitler directs at the German people. He uses his interpretation of the concept of 'survival of the fittest' to proclaim that if the Nazi regime is destroyed then the German people should be destroyed with it. With this in mind he refuses to evacuate Berlin, condemning many of its inhabitants to death, saying 'the German people chose their fate and now their little throats are being cut.'

Issues to be aware of

Viewers should be aware that there are several graphic scenes, especially those depicting the suicides of Nazi officials and some of the war scenes. There was controversy surrounding the depiction of some characters, including Professor Schenck who although seems morally superior to other Nazi characters, was accused of performing medical experiments on prisoners in the Dachau concentration camp; and Wilhelm Mohnke who was accused of ordering the execution of a group of English POWs in 1940. Viewers should exercise caution if using this film as part of their HMD activities and ensure they set the context around the issues raised in the film.

You can use HMD resources to find out more about the Holocaust
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust>.