



RUBBLE NOIR

A Postwar Vision of the Vanquished

Marc Svetov

1945: EUROPEAN CITIES WERE ASHES AND RUIN.

Germany and Austria's beautiful old towns had been reduced to skeletons. Urban spaces were mountains of debris and teetering walls. The air smelled charred from incendiary bombs and the burnt flesh of unburied corpses. The physical devastation was staggering, as was the psychic. War had devastated the European soul: both it and its morality were *kaput*.

Millions of Europeans had been displaced by the war, wandering the roads: literal armies of roving Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Czechs, Slovaks—as well as ethnic Germans



The desolation of postwar Vienna was memorably conveyed to a global audience in Graham Greene's *The Third Man*, which depicted a ghostly city, above and below ground

expelled from the German-speaking areas eastwards. There were Eastern European Jews who had miraculously survived annihilation by the Nazis, French forced laborers ... the list went on and on. Roughly sixty million people perished during the war, but in its aftermath the pressing question became how to feed the survivors with a European economy in as much disarray as the crushed cities.

For generations of movie audiences, images of this grim postwar period are primarily drawn from a single film. *The Third Man*, released in 1949, was assembled by a remarkable confluence of talent: produced and directed by Carol Reed from an original script by Graham Greene, “presented” by Alexander Korda in cooperation with David Selznick. Starring Joseph Cotten, Orson Welles, Trevor Howard, Alida Valli and a troupe of splendid Austrian and British actors, it was instantly regarded as a classic.

Vienna, a city that had been “bombed about a bit,” is occupied by the four Allied powers, and its inhabitants live as best they can by means of the black market or whatever else will get them through. Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) arrives to visit and perhaps find work with his old school chum Harry Lime (Orson Welles), a fellow American. Holly believes Harry is running a medical charity in the city. Martins, a writer of pulp Westerns, may have been Greene’s parody of a naïve American; the author did have a fixed idea about innocence causing havoc. Martins, however, becomes the driving force of the film and its moral core. He tracks down his friend, who is in reality a black marketer and a mass murderer – of children, no less – owing to his selling of fake penicillin.

Welles is at his charming, sinister best as Harry Lime. He’s pursued by Major Calloway (Howard, in a performance of taciturn grace), a British officer working for the International Police. Calloway is the film’s other moral pole, along with his assistant Sergeant Payne (Bernard Lee). Beyond these three men, the city of Vienna, in

fact all of Europe, is portrayed as nothing more or less than a deceitful, murderous pit of infamy and moral turpitude.

The Third Man was an American-British effort. A different perspective comes in the frequently neglected films made in Germany by Germans after the cessation of hostilities. When the Allies breached the Western front and entered the *Reich* itself, SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces) opted, as a policy for occupation, to halt native film and theatrical production, which from 1933 until 1945 had been under the auspices of Josef Goebbels’ Ministry of Propaganda. The Allies knew, however, that they’d have to arrange entertainment for the defeated citizenry, which required significant organization and expertise prior to *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour).

Billy Wilder, German émigré and director of the classic noir *Double Indemnity*, returned to Berlin in 1945, this time wearing an army colonel’s uniform as a member of the Office of War Information. His mission: rebuild the German film and theater industries. This included the questioning and eventual “de-Nazification” of German artists. Wilder, who had left Germany in the early thirties during the Nazi rise, already knew many of them, along with their allegiances during the Reich’s regime. Wilder had contributed significantly to Paul Kohner’s and Ernst Lubitsch’s European Film Fund in Hollywood, which had helped a great many artists from the Central European film industry escape the Nazis and find work in America. He helped edit film footage from the German concentration camps that the Allies had discovered on their march to Berlin, footage that would shock the world; it was used in newsreel documentaries and as evidence in the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

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Not a stage set: Hildegard Knef and Wilhelm Borchert wander the ruins of Berlin in *The Murderers are Among Us* (1946), the first film made in postwar Germany

five-year span. Ufa—the biggest German film studio, equivalent to MGM and Warner Bros. combined—was disbanded by the Allies. Filmmakers had to be licensed by the Allies in order to make movies.

Most of what emerged from the defeated nations, principally Germany and Austria, were immediately tagged “rubble films” for obvious reasons. Made with little money and equipment, often under hazardous circumstances mainly due to the danger of unstable structures, they dealt with the war, Nazism, anti-Semitism, and the dire conditions of the postwar period. Whether all these films can be called “noir” is a moot point. If they weren’t comedies they all were *ipso facto* noir, for the era could only produce bleak and desperate dramas about guilt, betrayal, national identity and psychological breakdown.

THE FIRST FILM produced in Berlin after the war was *The Murderers are Among Us* (1946). Starring Hildegard Knef (changed to *Neff* when she briefly worked in Hollywood) and directed by Wolfgang Staudte, it is a downbeat existentialist film as well as a German attempt at moral redemption. Dr. Mertens (Wilhelm Borchert) is a returning soldier who prior to the war had

been a physician but is now a bitter drunk. When he learns that his former commanding officer, whom he’d left for dead on the battlefield, has survived to become a capitalist “bourgeois” factory owner (emphasized since the film was made under Soviet auspices), Mertens has a new mission in life: killing this mild-mannered mass murderer. Staudte’s revenge drama, the original “rubble film,” contains plenty of scenes in which Knef and Borchert, whose characters share a single bombed-out apartment, wend their way through Berlin’s darkened streets—merely paths carved among the endless piles of wreckage. They may as well be striding through lunar craters.



Paul Klinger and Ilse Steppat as the doomed lovers in *Marriage in the Shadows* (1947)

The most popular movie in Germany in the immediate postwar period, 1947’s *Marriage in the Shadows* is based on the true story of actor Joachim Gottschalk, whose 1941 murder-suicide (he killed his Jewish wife and child, then himself) was personally instigated by the evil machinations of Josef Goebbels. It is a moving melodrama, relentless in its pace, bleak and emotionally gripping. Its commercial success came despite the purported anti-Semitism of its intended audience.

One rubble noir that was specifically a war film was *Morituri*



A scene from 1948's controversial *Morituri*, which enraged German audiences



The Blum Affair (1948) was both noir and a study of nascent anti-Semitism

(1948). The title comes from the Latin phrase *Ave Imperator, morituri te salutant*, meaning: “Hail, Emperor (Caesar), those who are about to die salute you.” The story, based on the wartime experiences of producer Artur Brauner, concerns a group of refugees from a concentration camp hiding from the Nazis in a Polish wood; Brauner, a Polish Jew, had survived the war by fleeing to the Soviet Union. 1948, however, was still too early to show a German audience a film about Germans seen through the eyes of Poles and Jews. The wounds were still too raw. German audiences might flock to *Marriage in the Shadows* and weep for the Jewish woman and her husband who commit suicide to escape the Nazi henchmen, but *Morituri* was an affront to the image Germans had constructed of themselves; it was too brutal and frank about the behavior of the Fatherland’s followers. It was unapologetic and uncompromising and far too close to the bone for contemporary German audiences. They hated it, protesting en masse while it was being screened, sending hate letters to the filmmakers.

Later, of course, it was lauded as a classic, especially within the subgenre of Holocaust films. (It also featured the film debut of Klaus Kinski, as a Dutch concentration camp prisoner.) Brauner never regretted making *Morituri*, although its failure bankrupted him. He remained one of Germany’s only world-recognized film producers of the postwar period, a man with whom a great many talented and renowned stars and directors were eager to work. He was incidentally responsible for luring a few famous émigrés such as Robert Siodmak and Fritz Lang back to Germany in the 1950s to make films again. This was significant, for the national film industry up to the advent of the New German Cinema of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog was largely amateurish and second-rate—at least in comparison to its global radiance in the 1920s and early ’30s, when it was the rival of Hollywood. In the end, the joke was on the German audience, not on Brauner, who despite his alleged failure with *Morituri* became an honored filmmaker who did his country proud.

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The little-seen *Long is the Road* (1949) is a convincing portrait of the plight of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) in the zones occupied by the Western Allies. It’s also a plea for allowing Jews into British-occupied Palestine. It shows the partisan war against the Germans, the siege of Warsaw, and the city’s occupation by the Nazis, as well as some pretty accurate information about the Nazi death camps—doubly remarkable considering that most films made later mixed the truth with spurious “factoids.”

WHILE EVERY RUBBLE FILM tackled issues raised by the conflagration that nearly consumed Europe, several did so by using genre conventions. *The Blum Affair* (1948) is a noir gem of the “wrong man” variety, set in the late 1920s and showing how widely the judiciary of the Weimar Republic had been infiltrated by the nationalist, anti-Semitic far right bent on destroying the country’s young democracy. It harkens back to Fritz Lang’s films of the early 1930s (*M*, *Dr. Mabuse*), stories of big city crime with Expressionist shadows, judicious use of sound, and adventuresome camerawork. The film was directed by Erich Engel and featured the first screen appearance of Hans Christian Blech, who turned in a stellar performance as Gabler, a mendacious and scheming former *Freikorps* member. This paramilitary organization consisted of former volunteer soldiers, alienated men who sought

camaraderie with others who hadn’t adjusted to civilian life in the wake of Germany’s defeat in World War I. The reigning Social Democrats of the Weimar Republic opportunistically employed them to battle labor unions and other “subversive elements,” putting down rebellions in many German cities, most dramatically in Berlin and Munich in 1919. Many Nazi leaders hailed from the ranks of the *Freikorps*, such as Heinrich Himmler; Ernst Röhm, founder of the storm troopers; and Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz. The *Freikorps* were disbanded when Hitler took power in 1933, their members assimilated into the Nazi state and military structure.

FALLOUT BEYOND GERMANY

The greatest rubble noir made on the continent was undoubtedly *Germany Year Zero* (1948), created by Italian neo-realist Roberto Rossellini. A bleak little masterpiece only 73 minutes in length, it is arguably the final statement on the morally confused young people roaming unchecked through Germany's destroyed cities, a dilemma that vexed both the Allies and the German authorities. The film was shot in Berlin with the help of German émigré writer Max Colpet, featuring a cast of amateur actors. It is a harrowing portrayal of the effects of Nazi ideology upon the impressionable mind of one German boy. One of the most powerful films ever made, it addresses an evil that escaped formal retribution at Nuremberg: the Nazi poison planted in, and still infecting, young minds.

Vienna is the backdrop of *Stolen Identity* (1952), produced by Turhan Bey on location three years after *The Third Man*. Comparisons with the Carol Reed production, however, are unfair. The film is worth seeing, especially for its oleaginous portrayal of the Viennese cultural machine and its depiction of an insanely jealous concert pianist played by Francis Lederer. Economically directed, this odd and successful little noir holds up well.

There was, of course, another defeated Axis power. *Drunken Angel* (1948) is a Japanese entry in the rubble noir cycle. The film was directed by Akira Kurosawa, with Toshiro Mifune as a tubercular small-time *yakuza* gangster, augmented by the wonderful Takashi Shimura (leader of the *Seven Samurai*) as Doctor Sanada. Japan's cities consisted mostly of wooden houses, there were few concrete and steel structures. The Allied firebombing left little standing; Kurosawa translated the familiar "rubble" landscape into cholera-infested pools of bubbling water in the slums of Tokyo.

Kurosawa hated the *yakuza* and their "honor"—it was clear that the reestablishment of these criminal structures in postwar Japan revived the same samurai-worshipping military traditions of the 1930s and 1940s, which had nearly destroyed his generation. The film is emphatic in its criticism (by way of Dr. Sanada) of the outdated Japanese feudal-fascist-samurai ways; it clearly expresses hope for a fresh wind carrying rational, modern, Western ideas.

Stray Dog (1949), Kurosawa's follow-up to *Drunken Angel*, reentered rubble noir terrain. The film, again featuring Shimura and Mifune in the leading roles, revolves around a police-issued Colt pistol being pickpocketed from police Detective Murakami (Mifune) on a crowded bus during a typically scorching Japanese summer. Kurosawa shows everyone half-dying from the heat, including the "stray dog" panting hoarsely under the opening credits. To recover his pistol, Mifune prowls among the petty criminals and thieves fencing stolen goods in the city's red light district.

Going "underground" merely requires Murakami to dress in a ragged Japanese army uniform. Among the thieves, losers, hustlers and loners on Tokyo's crowded streets he doesn't stand out—just another war veteran with no place to go, down on his heels, this one scouting for a pistol to buy. Murakami is mentored by the wise and tolerant Det. Sato (Shimura), 15 years Murakami's senior and with a large family and a sense of humor young Murakami strikingly lacks. "A stray dog," says Sato, "becomes a mad dog." Also: "Bad luck can make or destroy a man."

When it's reported that his missing gun has been used in a robbery and then a murder, Murakami's pursuit of the culprit becomes desperate. It is now his *honor* at stake. This is emblematic of a generation of Japanese taught to live by the samurai ethics and ridiculously high standards of honor—such as "no surrender" during the war. It's a theme Kurosawa returns to time and again in his films. Murakami's was a generation that only knew the war. This is emphasized by the cryptic dialogue about the "après guerre" malaise alluded to as Murakami and Sato are talking together at the latter's home, a congenial place bustling with the comings and goings of his kids and his friendly wife. Murakami shares traits with Jim Wilson, the character played by Robert Ryan in *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), another lonely, intensely dedicated cop more than a little stunted in his interaction with the world outside of police work.

—Marc Svetov



Germany Year Zero (1948)



Stolen Identity (1952)



Drunken Angel (1948)



Original German program from *And the Heavens Above* (1947), starring Hans Albers, the “German John Wayne”

Gabler murders a businessman in a simple-minded plot to get money and finds himself involved with the police and judges who want to pin the murder on an innocent Jewish merchant with democratic leanings. In *The Blum Affair* Berlin is presented as a cosmopolitan 1920s metropolis, poised to become the next Paris. The seizure of power by the Nazis derailed that destiny, and in this sense the film reflects on how nascent Nazis infiltrated the state, manipulating the justice system and the police through sinister anti-Semitism. It also shows the “lost” Germany, the one with a semblance of democratic ethics and civic pride, qualities obliterated by the rise of Third Reich.

1947’s *Police Raid* (*Razzia*) was the first crime film made by East German studio DEFA, and next to *Marriage in the Shadows*, the most popular German film of the era. The black market is explored in what would be the standard über-moralistic point of view. The setting is the sleazy but stylish Alibaba Club in rubble-strewn Berlin. A young and conflicted returned German POW is torn by his loyalties to two older men—the owner of the Alibaba, Goll, who employs him, and the young man’s father, Naumann, a police detective investigating Goll’s smuggling activities. It’s a morality play set against the backdrop of a defeated postwar Berlin with no economy to speak of but a shadow one. The young man turns on his crooked “benefactor” when he learns that Goll has murdered his father.

The black market was also a factor in *And the Heavens Above* (1947), essentially a vehicle for actor Hans Albers. Enormously popular with German audiences, he was an aggressive, honey-tongued Teutonic version of John Wayne with a little Clark Gable thrown

in. In this film, he’s definitely the “hero” although he’s a hustler, scrounging only to earn enough money so his son, a wounded former soldier, can get an operation to restore his sight. The son does not approve and moralizes as purely as a Nazi, using the same claptrap phrases the party had been preaching for twelve years. The unsubtle connection between Jews and the black market was routine in these films and in the media, where such “reports” permeated the young German “democratic” press for years to come. The father, chastened in a rather phony way, sees the light and gets a job on a construction crew. All live happily ever after. Yet our sympathy is not with his Nazi-inspired prick of a son. It’s with the cynical older man, who is glad to be rid of the Nazis. Under the crust, he is a joyous and vital person, optimistic about the future.

The aggressive behavior of the German police as shown in these films is reminiscent of darker days. They barge into people’s apartments and terrorize them, beating and frightening people half to death. Apparently, Gestapo habits weren’t easy to shake, at least on-screen. In U.S. noirs of this period brutality is noticed, and aggressive cops (like Robert Ryan in *On Dangerous Ground*) are admonished and suspended (if only temporarily). By contrast, German police are positively authoritarian, browbeating and strong-arming civilians. What’s more, they see black marketers as scum—there is no ambiguity, unlike in British or American films where there often is empathy for lawbreakers.

While the Allies (American, Britain, France and the USSR) ruled over Berlin, there was not a single instance of Allied police and gov-



An evocative image from the Communist-produced *Street Acquaintance* (1948)

ernmental intervention onscreen—or even any sight of Allied military or civilians. It’s interesting that in all these films Russian and American soldiers are completely absent. (Not so in Italian neo-realist cinema, where American soldiers are omnipresent, especially in Rome and Naples.) There’s nary a GI or a Red Army recruit to be seen when in fact they constantly patrolled the divided city. Rubble films are s-lipsistic; there’s no world beyond the daily domesticity of the defeated and demoralized nation; only the police still seem to function well,

taking the moral high road for law and order, when a couple years earlier they’d been working for the Nazis. These films never show the victors, only the vanquished: the survivors of the bombings, sons without fathers, despairing mothers acting desperately “out of character,” unable to steer their wayward children to the right path.

THE FATE OF FUTURE generations of Germans is an ever-present concern in the rubble films, along with the fear that they had already been lost. Postwar German youth were fed up with “ideals.” It had been driven out of them—save for the fanatics—by the crushing of the Nazis and the contempt shown them by the Allies.

Produced by the East German Communist movie studio DEFA, *Street Acquaintance* (1948) is a striking entry in the postwar cycle. It depicts the “betrayed” generation innocently (and not so innocently) infecting others with sexually transmitted diseases—e.g. syphilis—in the wild times following the war. These German youths had been betrayed across the board: by Hitler, by his promises, by the nationalist sacrifice for German honor. They now wanted to grab all they could out of life before growing old. The movie features Gisela Trowe (who also played the murderer’s wife in *The Blum Affair*) as a young woman seeking sexual escapades as well as sensual satiety, eating and drinking her fill after the lean war years, her childlike gluttony almost life-affirming.

The other “youthful” actor is 38-year-old Harry Hindemith as a returning POW. Trowe and Hindemith epitomized German youth of the

RUBBLE DOCUMENTARIES Bringing the Unspeakable to Light (except in the U.S.A.)

Two documentaries give context to the environment in which rubble noirs were made: *A Defeated People* (1946), written and directed by British documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, and *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* (1948), by American Stuart Schulberg. Two sides of the same coin, they were released in Germany under the auspices of their respective Allied military governments.

Both deal with the catastrophe and consequences of the war, but in different ways. Jennings’ film empathetically portrays the ruins of the German cities, the wandering population searching for relatives and lost ones. In *A Defeated People*, one sees urban inhabitants burrowing ant-like amongst the rubble, dwelling in the cellars of ruined buildings. Yet we see men, women and children, indomitable, continuing with life. The kids treat the ruined cityscape as a vast playground, with actual military equipment lying around for use in fabulous war games. Jennings’ film is about how a vanquished populace gets back on its feet despite a food allowance of only 1,000 to 1,200 calories per person a day. It ends with the big question mark, “Whither Germany’s youth?,” as we watch several innocent German children play Ring-Around-the-Rosie.

By contrast, *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* is about the nation’s manifest guilt. The first Nuremberg Trials took place between November 20, 1945, and October 1, 1946. The film features accused Nazi officials in the dock, with excerpts from the trial, speeches by the various lawyers, defendants, and judges, as well as footage from the Nazi concentration camps. Schulberg’s documentary was made for German audiences. It was widely seen there and set for release in America. It was suppressed, however, by the U.S. government, which was reluctant to rekindle feelings of hatred for the German people—our new allies against the Communist menace.



Courtroom scene from *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* (1948)



American director Stuart Schulberg in uniform

—Marc Svetov



Actor Fritz Kortner (with cigar), who'd exiled himself to Hollywood during the war, returned to Germany to write and star in 1949's *The Last Illusion*

time. Both actors would become fixtures in German cinema, enjoying long careers. In real life, Hindemith made the transition from a callow and convicted Nazi with official party membership to an equally committed member of the Communist Socialist Unity party (SED).

Street Acquaintance was an official and didactic warning against the dangers of venereal disease, bizarrely juxtaposing the danger of syphilis with the “salvation” offered by a team of dedicated German physicians. It induces real unease in the viewer, even today. Only four years earlier these state-supporter “saviors” were busy euthanizing “unworthy” people in hospitals and mental institutions. This authoritarian instinct on the part of doctors and policemen would be fairly constant in postwar German films, made in both West and East Germany. It would fade in time, but during the rubble noir years old habits died hard.

Directed by Gustav Lamprecht, 1946's *Somewhere in Berlin* is, like many rubble noirs, shot in a documentary style similar to what the Italian neo-realists were creating at the same time. It revolves around the city's “wild” children, left to grow up on their own, without fathers, or with paternal POWs bringing their misery home. One such father, Iller (Hindemith again), returns home a psychological wreck, still dressed in his ragged uniform. Unable to revive the parking garage he operated prior to the war, he becomes an object of mockery for the neighbors and a source of shame for his son Gustav. The boy, like many of his playmates, admires the city's hustlers and gangsters, and seeks adventures involving thievery, stolen goods, and black marketeering—much of it revolving around contraband cigarettes. They were vital in a city where Germans had no money; with

the Nazi *Reichsmark* annulled as a currency, people used cigarettes as a means of exchange. Smokes were a status symbol, for the kids as well as the older population.

The Last Illusion (1949) is a powerful and devastatingly pessimistic portrait of postwar students in a university city, directed by Josef von Báky and starring Fritz Kortner (who also wrote the screenplay). He plays an exiled Jewish professor who comes back to teach at a renowned German college. It features a singular depiction of the exiled German artistic and intellectual community of Los Angeles in the 1940s—whose many émigrés contributed to the creation of film noir (Lang, Wilder, Preminger, Opus, Siodmak, et al). The professor returns with a small American entourage of philosophy students curious about how Europe went mad and destroyed itself. The German student body's resistance against democracy and personal freedom, its waspish nationalism, and its lingering anti-Semitism eventually smothers the spirit and murders the hope of the re-emigrated professor. The audience is left to contemplate the spiritual fate of a generation led astray by twelve years of Nazi rule.

RUBBLE NOIRS WERE NOT immune to star power. *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1947), often called the rubble version of *Grand Hotel*, featured a plethora of well-known German actors (Willy Birgel, Winnie Markus, Hildegard Knef, Victor de Kowa, Sybille Schmitz). The film uses the suicide of a Jewish woman to explore the lives of her family, friends, and associates, all guests in the same hotel. It was set against the backdrop of Germany's WWI defeat; the actor Birgel had been famous during the Nazi era for his film role as a wealthy equestrian (a former Calvary officer) who wins

competitions “for the Fatherland.” The casting of Birgel and Schmitz presents bitter ironies, especially in the latter’s portrayal of a Jewish woman forced to commit suicide. Schmitz, who’d appeared in Dreyer’s *Vampyr*, had become a Nazi sympathizer to continue working in the ’30s. In *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, Birgel has arranged for his Jewish wife’s disappearance to prevent Nazi bureaucrats from ending his career. Postwar, Birgel was put on the Allies’ blacklist for his active role in making Nazi propaganda pictures. This role was part of his “de-Nazification.”

The sophisticated *Film Without a Name* (1948) began as a satire, revolving around a film crew making a comedy (!) amidst the psychological trauma of the German citizenry. The artists debate whether the German people—or anyone at the time—had a right to “entertainment” in light of recent atrocities committed in the name of the Fatherland. German star Willy Fritsch heads a cast that includes Hildegard Knef, Erich Ponto (Professor Winkler in *The Third Man*), and an assortment of other well-known German performers.

In the film within the film, Knef plays Christine, a country girl who keeps house for, and eventually falls in love with, a cultivated Berlin art dealer, Martin. Class differences put strains on their romance, which the war splits wide open. Martin performs his military service, while Christine returns to the family farm. The war leaves Martin penniless, and when he tracks down Christine to salvage their love, her father rejects him as a suitor. As the filmmakers argue over various endings, each plays out onscreen, revealing how the story could be reinterpreted in different ways—tragedy, comedy, farce, etc. This inventive reflection on cinematic form and function, and the process of making movies, was not seen again in German film until the rise of Fassbinder and Herzog in the 1970s.

1947’s *In Those Days*, aka *Seven Journeys*, directed by Helmut Käutner, recounts vignettes involving an automobile with numerous owners during the Nazi and postwar era. At the start, two mechanics are stripping the car for parts and talking of “those days”—meaning the Nazi years. They openly wonder whether “human beings” existed at all during that time. This leads into the stories of the various owners: a man fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933; a modernist composer banned from publicly performing; a married couple—she’s Jewish, he’s not—committing suicide together in 1938, shortly after *Kristallnacht*,



Original German cinema program for *Love '47* (1948), starring Hilda Krahl



Between Yesterday and Tomorrow (1947) was part of actor Willy Birgel's “de-Nazification”

the Nazi pogrom against the Jews; a resistance fighter trying to escape to Switzerland; two German soldiers on the Eastern Front, killed by Russian troops while riding on a lonely road; a noblewoman and her servant, involved in the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler; and finally, a German deserter during the last days of the war who finds the car hidden in a shed. He helps a woman carrying a newborn baby flee from Russian troops. They are helped by a kindly German military policeman near Hamburg; he knows the war is lost and doesn’t care anymore. The film characterizes Germans as resistant to Nazi ideology, despite their conformity during the Nazis’ reign. In that sense, the film is an apology for the nation’s behavior, trying to show the Allies that, despite their reservations, Germans were humane and not in their hearts collaborators with the Nazis.

Love '47 (1948) is perhaps the most unusual of the postwar rubble noirs. It is based on a popular play, Wolfgang Borchert’s *The Man Outside*, a chamber piece that dramatizes the disillusionment of the men who had blindly followed the *Führer* into catastrophe—the horrors of the Eastern front, mass death, the waste of youthful ideals for a corrupt and mendacious ideology—all matters rattling in the German psyche. *Love '47* deals with a returning POW and a suicidal young woman, set amidst the rubble of Hamburg. The pivotal scene has the embittered ex-soldier Jürgen confronting a former gen-



The multi-national travelers on Hollywood's *Berlin Express* (1948): Merle Oberon, Robert Coote, Roman Toporow, Charles Korvin, and Robert Ryan

eral at his dining table; the general hasn't a hint of bad conscience about ordering men into suicide missions on the Eastern front. Incorporating experimental techniques, some outright Expressionist, *Love '47* is the most artistically ambitious of the rubble noirs.

Its ironic backstory concerns director Wolfgang Liebeneiner. He had directed *I Accuse* (1941), which constituted the first salvo in the Reich's campaign to legitimize euthanasia of the nation's hopelessly ill. *I Accuse* is the story of a young woman with an incurable disease who is euthanized by her husband; it was an attempt to convince the German people that this approach was an effective way to deal with the racially impure, the unhealthy, the mentally ill—and others. (It echoes later in *Germany Year Zero*, when a young boy decides it is a matter of “mercy” to kill his sick and bedridden father.)

American and British rubble noir came later than the continental variety and focused more on the transition from World War II to the Cold War. *Berlin Express* (1948), directed by Jacques Tourneur, is set among the ruins of Frankfurt and Berlin. Unfortunately, it is a confused film, preoccupied with the character of a German politician (Paul Lukas) supported by the Allies whose chief concern is a reunified Germany, which in 1948 was hardly a cause for anyone. At times it's also involuntarily comical, as when Robert Ryan implores the film's token Russian officer to

“try to understand” the West. *Red Danube* (1949), an anti-Communist noir set in Vienna, boasts a plausible plot but a leaden pace. It offers wholesomely American Janet Leigh as a Russian and Ethel Barrymore as a Mother Superior. Peter Lorre also tried his hand at rubble noir, writing, directing and starring in 1951's misbegotten *The Lost One*. [The film is explored at length in NOIR CITY #8, Fall 2013.]

For all the lasting impact of *The Third Man*, it is the “rubble films” made from 1946-1950 that illustrate the German people's need to carry on no matter how dire the circumstances: the ruination engulfing them, the absence of a sovereign state, the humiliation of defeat, the guilt of heinous war crimes committed in their name. These films were a search for new cathartic “entertainment” in the face of ugly, unalterable facts. Anton Karris' justly famous *Third Man* zither theme, its lilting melody a counterpoint to the horrors the film finds on the streets of Vienna and in the children's ward of a hospital, was supposed to represent a stroke of irony. That, too, seems to have been swept away over the years, forgotten along with the rubble itself. ■



My thanks to Sandra Schulberg for providing me with Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today and to Rainer Clodius for copies of many commercially unavailable rubble noirs.