

The Good German: the cost of playing fast and loose with big questions

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The Good German, directed by Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by Paul Attanasio, based on the novel by Joseph Kanon

In July 1945, near the end of the Second World War, the “Big Three” Allied leaders met at Potsdam, Germany, near Berlin. US President Harry Truman, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived to hammer out post-war arrangements for vanquished Germany and Europe as a whole.

Reduced to rubble during the war, Berlin, the capital of Nazi Germany, had been the target of 363 air raids, during which some 4,000 people were killed, 10,000 injured and 450,000 made homeless. Two months before the Potsdam conference, following the German surrender, the city was divided into zones of military occupation among the Americans, Russians, British and French.

It is this historical and political landscape that forms the setting for Steven Soderbergh’s new film *The Good German*, adapted from the popular novel by Joseph Kanon. Arriving to cover the Potsdam Peace Conference, US war correspondent Jake Geismer (George Clooney) is shocked by the extent of Berlin’s destruction. On the other hand, his driver, Corporal Tully (Tobey Maguire), thrives in the chaos of ruination as a black marketeer whose only loyalty is to the greenback.

But when Tully’s exploits involve a German rocket expert coveted equally by the Americans and Russians, he ends up dead in the Russian zone. Jake learns that Tully’s mistress—and ultimate reason for embarking on the high-risk venture—is Lena, the wife of sought-after scientist, Emil Brandt. Lena also happens to be the old flame who has obsessed Jake since his previous stint in Berlin as the manager of a news bureau.

Under cover of the city’s turmoil, kidnappings and assassinations are the preferred means toward political ends employed by the occupying powers. Following the trail of Tully’s murderer lands Jake in the middle of the deadly machinations of the two future cold warriors, the US and the USSR, both vying to obtain Germany’s advanced knowledge of rocketry and biological warfare. This goes on as American military prosecutors scour Nazis records to determine who should be tried for crimes against humanity. How deeply implicated in war crimes was the German scientific community,

the precious key to gaining advantage in the nascent arms race?

When it is established that Lena’s husband Emil Brandt has proof that he and his colleagues used slave labor in their work, making them directly responsible for thousands of deaths, it is apparently of no consequence to Soviet officials. But for the Americans, as the ‘democratic’ reorganizers of the world, it is a reality that must be suppressed.

The complex matter of America’s role in the aftermath of Germany’s defeat, including its involvement with high-level Nazis, is crucial to an understanding of how and on what basis the post-war restabilization of capitalism was achieved. Consequently, with varying degrees of political clarity, it has been the focus of many valuable cinematic and literary works.

Clooney comments in the film’s production notes that the “Americans didn’t want a headline in the middle of the Peace Conference that would start World War III. It was a very tenuous moment. Everyone was shaking hands over their victory and then, within seconds, putting up demarcation zones and fighting over the spoils of the war. Immediately the Cold War began.”

Important historical facts make an appearance in the film. No one comes off very well. American interim military governor in Berlin, Colonel Muller (Beau Bridges) is an unsavory figure, as is the opportunist US Congressman, Breimer (Jack Thompson). The Russian General Sikorsky, always operating in stealth, is well played by Moscow-born actor Ravil Isaynov. Further highlighting the nightmarish time, a newspaper headline reports the incineration of Hiroshima by a US atomic bomb.

Using black-and-white cinematography, combined with archival footage to reproduce 1945 Berlin, *The Good German* intends to be the story of what the war has made of the population—a people, described by the filmmakers, “still reeling from the horrors of the war and desperate to salvage their humanity in the shadow of the often unbearable knowledge of what they did to survive.”

These are significant problems and the filmmakers are creditably ambitious.

So why does the film, in the end, add up to so little emotionally or politically? Why does the chilling fact that Americans were stealing Nazis at the beginning of the Cold War make so small an impact? How is it that a movie which

points to the seamy side of post-war German restoration, treating certain of its aspects quite critically, is so weak and amorphous?

A comment by scriptwriter Attanasio provides something of a clue. “What we’re trying to capture is the question of how well can you ever really know another person? It’s a classic film noir theme and it fits the political context. After the war, with 30 million dead, Europe in ruins, and the knowledge that your neighbor might be a murderer, there was plenty of guilt to go around.” No doubt, but to discover the more fundamental causes of the war and its horrors, and those most fundamentally responsible, requires something more than this rather superficial approach.

In an observation that is not much more helpful, director Soderbergh explains that the film is “about hypocrisy and denial. It’s human nature and the inevitable outgrowth of any post-war environment. That’s something that has always been with us and always will be.”

If this truth about “human nature” has always existed and is presumably well-known and well-studied, in what way does the making of this film represent a discovery process? A substantive work has to be the exploration of issues about which the artist does not have all the answers ahead of time. The banality of the comments and approach may have something to do with the essential flatness of the final product.

Comprehending fascism and the origins of a world war may be a lot to ask from contemporary cinema. It would have been a lot to ask from filmmakers sixty years ago. Even so, a movie like *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), about postwar Vienna, concretely indicts the making of dirty money, not abstract human nature. Orson Welles’ Harry Lime, who sells adulterated penicillin causing children to become deformed and die, tell us something about the real face of capitalism and its wartime profiteering. A film like *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), with its frightening premonition of a nuclear holocaust, is far more powerful than Soderbergh’s work. Perhaps the artists were not entirely clear about the past, but they had lived through traumatic events, which had not left them unscathed, and they were disturbed about the present. And their films exude a great passion!

The Good German wants the look of postwar films, but is satisfied, ultimately, to skim the surface of the events themselves. It wants the feel of the doomed love story in *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz), but creates almost no chemistry between Jake and Lena. Atrocities are mentioned and various points are made, but nobody is responsible because blame is universal.

The fact that Soderbergh and his screenwriter have gone out of their way to alter Lena as she appeared in Kanon’s novel, where her innate decency was the foundation of Jake’s long-term ardor, can’t be accidental. The movie unconvincingly scripts her as a one-note personality twisted by daily exposure “to the depravity of human nature” (in Blanchett’s own

words). It follows that Lena has been party to heinous acts, a revelation that seems tacked on to the narrative. That she seems to be the main object of the film’s dark cinematography is an unsubtle gesture, underscoring the film’s semi-misanthropic notions.

“Everyone in this story,” says Soderbergh, “whether representing themselves and their own lives or representing institutions or governments, is not speaking directly about what they want and is hoping they can achieve their goals without ever having to tell the whole truth.”

Carelessly amalgamating the misdeeds of individuals—victim or even victimizer—with the criminality of governments and entire ruling elites serves to emphasize the essential unseriousness of Soderbergh’s enterprise. The unfortunate artistic outcome is *The Good German*’s overall lack of commitment and empathy. Despite its preoccupation with the physical details of post-war Berlin, the film is desperately short on emotional authenticity. Replicating the period technically does not compensate for a vacuum in more important areas. Without a deep-going treatment of the postwar years, without any real effort to grasp them as a part of social development and history or as *having any implication for our own day*, even carefully-organized images of poverty and dislocation tend to be blunted and unmoving.

There is no reason to doubt Soderbergh’s sincerity in undertaking this film project. It would seem he wanted to tackle big historical material. That’s all to the good. But one cannot turn these things off and on, like a faucet. Making the transition from independent artist to Hollywood insider has its perils. He is not the first to believe that he could outwit the American film industry. The question, as always, is: who has outwitted whom? When Soderbergh turns now to weighty matters, he is not the same filmmaker he was at 26.

Somewhat dilettantishly, the filmmaker believes he can shift gears and carelessly jump from making commercial bon-bons like *Ocean’s Eleven* and *Ocean’s Twelve* into a compelling project about post-World War II Germany by imitating directors like Curtiz and Billy Wilder (*Foreign Affair*, 1948). Unhappily, the results are less than the sum of the parts (or pretensions).



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