



## **The (Un)Timeliness of Satire: The Reception of the *The Great Dictator* in West Germany, 1952-1973**

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When *The Great Dictator* (1940) was re-released in West Germany in 1973, the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, a leading daily newspaper, welcomed it as the “most important film satire” ever, and the religious paper *Leben und Glauben* declared it to be as “timely as when it was made”.<sup>1</sup> The film’s success at the German box office exceeded all expectations. At a time when almost no re-releases and only few American films appeared on the annual lists of the ten top grossing movies, *The Great Dictator* was the ninth highest grossing movie in West Germany in 1973.<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast, opinions about the film in the immediate post-war period had been sharply divided. While *The Great Dictator* was not released in West Germany in the immediate post-war years, various German critics managed to see it. They all noted Chaplin’s departure from his classic tramp incarnation in his portrayal of a Hitler-like dictator, and his break with traditional filmic storytelling when he addresses his final speech directly to the camera and thus to the cinema audience. Writing in 1952, Friedrich Luft found that in *The Great Dictator* Chaplin was no longer true to himself; other critics, however, saw a fundamental continuity in Chaplin’s attempt to convey a “message of brotherly love in sober, egotistical, heartless times.”<sup>3</sup> When the film was finally released in 1958, in sharp contrast with its massive success in 1973, it did not find a large audience.

In this paper, I trace the changing critical and box office fortunes of *The Great Dictator* in West Germany from the 1950s to the 1970s. The first section deals with the heated

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<sup>1</sup>Wolfram Schütte, “Bedeutendste Satire des Films”, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 9 March 1973; review of *The Great Dictator*, *Leben und Glauben*, 30 Juni 1973. Like subsequent unpaginated references, these articles are in the clippings files for the films in the Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF), Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Garnarz, “Hollywood in Germany: The Role of American Films in Germany, 1925-1990”, *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, ed. David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes, Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Luft, “Vom großen, schönen Schweigen”, *Der Monat*, no. 44/1952, p. 192; B. Sotowy, “Charlie Chaplin - der große Magier”, *LFP am Wochenende*, 7 June 1952.

debate among West German critics, across the 1950s, about the reasons for the long delayed release of *The Great Dictator*. The second section examines West German critical responses to the film during the film's release in 1958, as well as its only modest box office performance. The third section deals with the enormous critical and commercial success of the film in 1973, relating it to the increasing popularity of representations of the Nazi past, to successful cycles of Hollywood imports, and to changes in audience composition and public opinion.

"Where is the German 'Dictator'?" asked the headline of a German newspaper somewhat provocatively in November 1952.<sup>4</sup> After explaining that the question did not refer to any real-life Hitler successor but to Chaplin's film, the article reported that dubbed prints of *The Great Dictator* were ready for their West German release, but United Artists was holding them back. In the writer's opinion, "most probably, cinemagoers had opened their heart" for this film - a somewhat tortured way of saying that German audiences wanted to see it, while also allowing for the possibility that may-be they did not.

The article presented a series of speculations about the reasons for United Artists withholding the film. Most importantly, "the Americans want to avoid any discussion about Chaplin at the moment, because they know that their anti-Chaplin attitude has not met with much approval in Germany". This referred to the decision made only a few weeks earlier by the US Attorney General to rescind Chaplin's re-entry permit during his trip to Europe, thus in effect barring him from the United States.<sup>5</sup> The article went on to suggest that the West German government, which possibly exerted influence both on United Artists and on German distributors, wanted to avoid any "major controversy about this biting Hitler satire", especially in rightwing circles. Finally, there was the possibility that "Chaplin himself did not want his film to be shown in Germany."

The debate heated up later that year when it was rumoured that Chaplin was, in fact, not at all against the German release, but, on the contrary, was so angered by the actions of "the string pullers of the German film industry" who had prevented the film from being shown, that in revenge he was in effect withholding his latest film *Limelight* from Germany.<sup>6</sup> Once again it was claimed that the German audience had been eagerly awaiting *The Great Dictator* for years. A few months later, an article on Chaplin, who had in the meantime settled in Switzerland, featured an official denial by United Artists of the above rumours.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Hardy, "Wo bleibt der deutsche 'Diktator'?", *Abendpost*, 8-9 November 1952.

<sup>5</sup>David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art*, London: Paladin, 1986, p. 572.

<sup>6</sup>"Wo bleibt Chaplins Diktator", *Welt der Arbeit*, 12 December 1952.

<sup>7</sup>"Chaplin kehrt nicht zurück", *Der Kurier*, 16 April 1953.

Thus, there was no agreement about who was responsible for the long delay in the film's release, and why. Yet, the idea that there was some kind of ban, enacted - against the presumed interests of German cinemagoers wanting to see the film - by the American or West German governments, by United Artists or powerful forces in the West German film industry, or by Chaplin himself, persisted into the late 1950s. Indeed, when the film was finally released in the summer of 1958, the front page of United Artists' press book ominously announced it as "Charles Chaplin's masterpiece, which up to now was not permitted in German movie theatres".<sup>8</sup> It was also reported that the distributor encouraged exhibitors to advertise the film with the tag line: "A film that Germans have been forbidden to see for years."<sup>9</sup> The film's release and prospective ticket purchases were thus presented as liberating acts of resistance, on behalf of or by German citizens, against unidentified forces of political repression.

At the same time, critics, rather than continuing to assume that audiences had long wanted to see *The Great Dictator*, began to consider the possibility that the film would have been hurtful or offensive to German sensibilities (not just in rightwing circles) in the immediate post-war years. The horrific reality of the Nazi regime and World War II, it was argued, had possibly been too close for Germans to be able to consider it an appropriate subject for comedy.<sup>10</sup> In this context, it might have been "commercial considerations" on the part of United Artists, which led to the film's delayed release.<sup>11</sup> As long as Germans were not ready to enjoy the film, there was indeed not much commercial point in releasing it. This eminently reasonable suggestion, which, I think, comes closest to the truth, was articulated in newspapers only in a vague and indirect manner, while the predominant discourse in the German press continued to focus on shadowy forces driven by political rather than financial motivations.

Let's consider the operations of United Artists during this period. Earlier than most American distributors, United Artists had withdrawn from the German market in 1935,<sup>12</sup> so that the last Chaplin film released there had been *City Lights* (1931). When the

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<sup>8</sup>The pressbook can be found in the clippings file for *The Great Dictator* at DIF.

<sup>9</sup>Erik Verg, "Lachen oder weinen?", *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 27-28 September 1958. Other articles mentioned political intervention by the "Allies and the German experts they consulted"; Hans Ulrich Kersten, "Chaplins Versuch über Diktatur", *Nürnberger Zeitung*, 28 August 1958. There also continued to be reports that Chaplin had personally prevented the film's release. See, for example, Horst Treuke, "Niemand lacht mehr über Chaplin", *8 Uhr-Blatt*, 3 September 1958, and "'Diktator' kommt zur rechten Zeit", *Vorwärts*, 29 August 1958.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Willy Haas, "Chaplin's 'Diktator' jetzt in Deutschland", *Die Welt*, 28 August 1958, and Kersten, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Kersten, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup>Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz: Der amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich*, Trier: WVT, 1999, p. 91.

company returned in 1945, it had to select films from the huge backlog of American releases never shown in Germany and from its current output. Among its backlog, both *Modern Times* (1936) and *The Great Dictator* at first sight looked like promising candidates for a profitable German release. *Modern Times* had been one of the twenty top grossing films of the 1930s in the US, and *The Great Dictator* had grossed more money than any other film in American history up to 1940 with the exception of *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).<sup>13</sup> However, United Artists executives knew that the huge success of Chaplin's features of the 1920s and early 1930s in the US,<sup>14</sup> had not translated into German box office success, despite Chaplin's popularity with intellectuals and big city audiences.<sup>15</sup> Hence the West German release of the two older films was delayed, and more recent Chaplin films were given priority. *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) and *Limelight* (1952) were released in 1952 and 1954, respectively, before *Modern Times* finally came out in 1956.<sup>16</sup>

That *The Great Dictator* had to wait even longer for its West German premiere most probably was due to its subject matter.<sup>17</sup> In the immediate post-war period, the largely German employees of the subsidiaries of major American distributors in West Germany were aware that negative portrayals of Germans in Hollywood films dealing with the Nazi era would not go down well with West German audiences.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, distributors either withheld such films or modified them (through dubbing and re-

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<sup>13</sup>Joel W. Finler, *The Hollywood Story*, London: Wallflower, 2003, p. 356; Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 466. For some reason, the enormous success of *The Great Dictator*, as documented by Schatz, is not taken into account by Finler.

<sup>14</sup>Finler, op. cit., p. 356.

<sup>15</sup>See Joseph Garncarz, "Questioning Chaplin's Popularity in Germany, 1925-1932", paper presented at this conference. Garncarz points out that only *The Circus* (1928), Chaplin's least successful feature in the US, was a hit in Germany.

<sup>16</sup>The years 1946-1957 also saw re-releases of *The Gold Rush* (1925/1946), *City Lights* (1931/1951) and *The Kid* (1921/1955) and of several short film compilations: *Lachen verboten* (1954), *Charlie Chaplins Lachparade* (1957) and *Das waren noch Zeiten* (1957). The latter included *Shoulder Arms* (1918), Chaplin's World War I satire which several Chaplin scholars have seen as a kind of precursor of *The Great Dictator*, although this connection was not made by German critics in the 1950s; an exception is Haas, op. cit. It is worth noting that, while most Chaplin releases were given the least restrictive rating ("ab 6", that is suitable for children aged 6 and older), Chaplin was by no means seen exclusively as a children's entertainer. Indeed, children under 12 were excluded both from *Limelight* and from *The Great Dictator*, and *Monsieur Verdoux* was even restricted to persons aged 16 and older. Information on German release dates and ratings is taken from *Zweitausendeins Lexikon des internationalen Films*, <http://www.filmevonaz.de>.

<sup>17</sup>It would be interesting to explore the reasons for the long delay in the release of *A King of New York* (1957), which only came into German movie theatres in 1976. Whereas *The Great Dictator* could be perceived, as we will see, as an anti-German film, if anything, *A King of New York* was anti-American.

<sup>18</sup>Joseph Garncarz, *Filmfassungen: Eine Theorie signifikanter Filmvariation*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 94-133.

editing) so as to remove 'ugly Germans' from their stories, thus, it was hoped, increasing their acceptance by West German audiences.<sup>19</sup> For obvious reasons, this latter strategy could not be applied to *The Great Dictator* - which did not, in fact, feature Germans directly, although its fictional land of Tomainia could not be mistaken for anything but Nazi Germany, and its grotesque dictator Adenoid Hynckel clearly represented Adolf Hitler.

The problems a film like *The Great Dictator* could be expected to encounter with West German audiences can be gauged by considering that making fun of Hitler was by no means a safe bet in post-war West Germany. In a 1952 opinion poll, about a third of respondents continued to hold a positive opinion of Hitler: 22% agreed with the statement that "Hitler made some mistakes but he was an excellent leader", and 10% agreed that "Hitler was the greatest statesman of the century: his true greatness will not emerge until later".<sup>20</sup> In 1955, 48% of respondents agreed that "if the war had not taken place, Hitler would have been one of the greatest German statesmen", and only 36% disagreed.<sup>21</sup> More generally, West Germans did not have a strong sense of responsibility for the war and Nazi crimes: In 1951, only 32% of respondents felt that Germany "was really responsible for the outbreak of war in 1939", while 24% blamed "other states" and 18% "both sides".<sup>22</sup>

*The Great Dictator* had the additional 'problem' of featuring a Jewish protagonist,<sup>23</sup> and therefore could be expected to come up against considerable anti-semitism in post-war West Germany. When asked about their "attitude towards the Jews", 23% of respondents in a 1949 poll gave anti-semitic replies and 15% "(g)uarded replies"; in 1952 these figures rose to 34% and 18% respectively.<sup>24</sup> When asked about "the cause

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. Films withheld from the West German market due to their problematic depiction of war-time and post-war Germany included *To Be or Not To Be* (1942; released in Germany in 1959), *The Search* (1948/1961), *A Foreign Affair* (1948/no German release), *Berlin Express* (1948/1954) and *Stalag 17* (1953/1960). By contrast, war-related foreign films that portrayed Germans (or Austrians) in a largely positive manner were not only released promptly but could even become major box office hits. These hits included *The Third Man* (1949; the fifth most successful film in West Germany during the 1950/51 season), *The One That Got Away* (1957; no. 2 in 1957/58) and *The Battle of the River Plate* (1957; no. 5 in 1957/58). Cp. Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", p. 105.

<sup>20</sup>Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann, *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls 1947-1966*, Allensbach: Verlag für Demoskopie, 1967, p. 203.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 199. As late as 1961, 88% of respondents rejected the proposition that they "personally as a German ... shared the blame for the mass extermination of Jews". The share of affirmative responses increased with the education of respondents. Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>23</sup>Furthermore, according to Joe Hembus, writing for the press book for the 1973 re-release of *The Great Dictator* (available at DIF), Chaplin himself had been attacked for being Jewish in the German press during the Nazi period. However, it is unclear whether many people in 50s Germany believed Chaplin to be Jewish.

<sup>24</sup>Noelle and Neumann, op. cit., p. 186.

of anti-semitism", 53% of respondents in the 1949 poll said it was the "(c)haracteristics of Jewish ethnic groups", that is, it was their own fault.<sup>25</sup> In response to the question whether "it would be better for Germany not to have any Jews in the country", in 1952 only 20% said it would not be better, while 37% said it would (the rest were undecided).<sup>26</sup>

These persistent anti-semitic and pro-Hitler sentiments, which United Artists' German employees would have been aware of (even if they did not study opinion polls or conduct their own market research, which they might well have done), made *The Great Dictator* a difficult film to market in post-war Germany. This, together with more general sensitivities about depictions of the Nazi era and the lacklustre performance of other Chaplin films, is likely to have been the main reason for United Artists' decision to wait with the film's release.

Across the 1950s, anti-semitic and pro-Hitler sentiments decreased gradually. In response to the above question about Hitler's statesmanship, positive responses went down from 48% in 1955 to 42% in 1956 and 41% in 1959, and negative responses went up from 36% in 1955 to 38% in 1956 and 42% in 1959.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the share of respondents who agreed that Germany was responsible for World War II rose from 32% in 1951 to 47% in 1956 and 50% in 1959, while the share of those holding "other states" responsible went down from 24% to 11% during this period.<sup>28</sup>

Responses to the question about the presence of Jews in Germany also changed dramatically: The share of those who welcomed their presence rose from 20% in 1952 to 35% in 1956 and 38% in 1958, and the share of those who did not dropped from 37% in 1952 to 29% in 1956 and 22% in 1958 (the rest being undecided).<sup>29</sup> More generally, by the late 1950s, older Germans had more distance to their experiences during the Nazi era, and the population now included a whole generation of young people who had been small children during the war or had been born afterwards. In the light of these trends, a successful release of *The Great Dictator* seemed at least possible, and in 1958 United Artists brought the film into German movie theatres.

Much like Chaplin's films in the 1920s and early 1930s, *The Great Dictator* did well in big cities in 1958, but was not successful across all of West Germany. The trade paper Film-

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

Echo collected reports from exhibitors concerning a film's critical and commercial success. In the initial reports for *The Great Dictator*, which came almost exclusively from cinemas in major cities, exhibitors noted that the film was reviewed positively in their locality and also did "very good" business.<sup>30</sup> Once the film went into a somewhat wider release, reports became quite negative, especially in smaller cities, where reviews were judged to be merely "satisfactory" and box office performance "poor".<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, in the end *The Great Dictator* was not distributed widely in West Germany, and its overall box office performance was only average for an American film, at a time when American films did not do particularly well at the West German box office, which was dominated by German (and, to a lesser extent, Austrian) films.<sup>32</sup> In other words, *The Great Dictator* was left far behind by many American films and much of the German competition.

The tone for the film's reception was set by its rating and its press book. The latter made it clear that, both in its content and through the mere 'fact' that it had been banned, *The Great Dictator* was first and foremost a political film. In a somewhat overwrought "Leitartikel" (editorial) worthy of a quality newspaper, the press book stated that the tramp figure had always served as a critique of the existing social order, and that Chaplin's double role in *The Great Dictator* focussed this critique on "dangerous and questionable state power" and "the senselessness of all dictatorships of the 20th century". On the one hand, the press book in this way managed to avoid specific references to Hitler and the Nazi regime, mindful, it seems, of the problematic relationship of prospective audiences to their own past. On the other hand, it attempted to flatter those audiences by defining their viewing of the film as an expression of their political maturity and insight rather than merely as an attempt to satisfy their entertainment needs.

Similarly, the film's rating, which excluded children under 12, signalled that some maturity was required for its consumption. This was in line with the partial repositioning of Chaplin as a maker of adult films rather than a children's and family entertainer in 50s Germany, exemplified by the restrictive ratings for *Monsieur Verdoux* in 1952 (16 and older) and *Limelight* (12 and older) in 1954. Indeed, in a pre-release article for *The*

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<sup>30</sup>"Echo des Films", *Film-Echo*, 11 April 1959.

<sup>31</sup>"Das fremdsprachige Filmangebot der Spielzeit 1958/59", *Film-Echo*, 31 December 1959, p. 1749.

<sup>32</sup>For example, throughout the 1950s, on average only one or two Hollywood imports per year were featured in the annual top ten in West Germany. Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", op. cit., pp. 124-6. Across the 1950s, almost half of all films released in West Germany came from the US but the market share of these imports (that is their share of all tickets sold in West Germany) was around 15%. Joseph Garncarz, *Populäres Kino in Deutschland: Internationalisierung einer Filmkultur, 1925-1990*, unpublished post-doctoral dissertation, University of Cologne, 1996, pp. 103, 444.

*Great Dictator*, the *Evangelischer Filmbeobachter*, a protestant film magazine based in Munich, highly recommended the film - as a "passionate and moving plea against tyranny, against all forms of dictatorship, and for democracy, for the freedom of all people" -, but only for those aged 16 and older.<sup>33</sup> The article also expressed doubts about the film's entertainment value. The "liberating" laughter, through which Chaplin's older films had given people so much "comfort", was here made impossible, because the realities that the film dealt with were "too cruel and hard" and Chaplin's humour "rather bitter".

More generally, throughout the post-war period, critical accounts of Chaplin's work often claimed (wrongly in the case of *The Great Dictator*) that, judging by the responses of American cinemagoers, his films after *Modern Times* had lost their popular appeal.<sup>34</sup> While West German critics may have celebrated him as one of the greatest film artists of all time, many no longer saw him as a successful entertainer. Indeed, with few exceptions,<sup>35</sup> reviewers of *The Great Dictator* agreed with the *Evangelischer Filmbeobachter* that the entertainment value of the film was limited, even if they thought - as many of them did - that, on the whole, it was a great movie. *Der Tag*, for example, acknowledged that "as a comic figure (Chaplin) is once again admirable" and his direction "masterly", yet the critic's (and the audience's) knowledge about all the harm caused by Hitler made it difficult "to take this matter lightly"; hence, only complete ignorance of the past would have made this film wholly enjoyable.<sup>36</sup> Several commentators pointed out that it was only Chaplin's ignorance of the true extent of Nazi crimes which had allowed him to produce *The Great Dictator* in the first place.<sup>37</sup>

The reviewer of the *Nürnberger Zeitung* did feel that most of the film was thoroughly enjoyable, but only because, in his view, "Hitler is gone with the wind, and with him the whole nightmare"; a sense of great historical distance, rather than ignorance, was here considered as a precondition for laughter.<sup>38</sup> Yet even this cheerful reviewer drew the line when it came to the Holocaust: "It is much more difficult to laugh when the film moves

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<sup>33</sup>*Evangelischer Filmbeobachter*, 14 August 1958. It seems that this review of the film related to its release in Switzerland.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example, "Der bedrohte Chaplin", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 September 1952, and Richard Reimer, "Ein großer alter Mann der Leinwand", *Rheinische Post*, 11 April 1959.

<sup>35</sup>For example, Jochen Weno, "Zwischen Lachen und Weinen", *Berliner Zeitung*, 26 August 1958; review of *The Great Dictator*, *Filmblätter*, 29 August 1958; review of *The Great Dictator*, *Die Filmwoche*, 6 September 1958. While these reviews celebrated the film's power to entertain - "I laughed so hard that I had tears in my eyes" (Weno) -, they still saw the need to give the audience a warning: "But don't forget: The film is twenty years old!"

<sup>36</sup>"Der 'Diktator' kommt zu spät", *Der Tag*, 27 August 1958. Cp. Haas, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, Wilhelm Mogge, "Überholte Zeitsatire", *Kölner Rundschau*, 27 September 1958.

<sup>38</sup>Kersten, op. cit.



into the ghetto", because in these scenes viewers were confronted with "a piece of reality" which should stop their laughter in its tracks.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Film-Echo commented that "the fate of the Jews in Germany is so tragic that it does not allow for any comedy".<sup>40</sup> The Hamburger Abendblatt quoted, and agreed with, one of the taglines in the press book: "A film, in which you will laugh and cry heartily."<sup>41</sup> While, in the view of this paper, the audience's contradictory response to the film provided them with a valuable experience, the Münchner Abendzeitung took offence: The audience's loud laughter only demonstrated that "apparently the Nazi terror has already been forgotten".<sup>42</sup> The critic argued that the film should never have been shown in front of an audience which might well include former concentration camp inmates or other victims of the Nazi regime.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the question whether the film could and should be enjoyed, critics raised a number of issues to do with the effectiveness of its satire. There was widespread agreement that the film's satire, in conjunction with Chaplin's final speech, was intended to teach audiences a lesson. Assuming that it was Chaplin's decision to release the film in West Germany in 1958, Vorwärts suggested, for example, that "this great artist, who more than anyone else is able to see into people's hearts" chose finally to bring the film to German audiences because they were in danger of forgetting the past and needed to be taught the film's lesson.<sup>44</sup> There was, however, considerable disagreement when it came to assessing whether this lesson was effective. Some critics argued that satire was not only an inappropriate approach to the subject at hand - because it ultimately served to trivialize evil -, but also that Chaplin simply had not enough knowledge about, and understanding of, Nazi Germany to make his satire perceptive. Thus, the Tagesspiegel wrote that Chaplin's satirical take on the Nazi regime only served to "make its true horror almost disappear".<sup>45</sup> In any case, the paper asked, "the Englishman Chaplin, who had never been to Germany, how could he possibly understand the depths of the German soul, from which Hitler emerged". Similarly, the Frankfurter Rundschau argued that *The Great Dictator* was ultimately too old and too ignorant of Nazi Germany, and

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<sup>39</sup>Cp. the following article on the response of a Jewish newspaper to the film: "Der große Diktator in jüdischer Beurteilung", *Hannoversche Presse*, 19 September 1958.

<sup>40</sup>Peter Herzberg, review of *The Great Dictator*, *Film-Echo*, 6 September 1958. Also see Gunter Groll, review of *The Great Dictator*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 September 1958.

<sup>41</sup>Erik Verg, "Lachen oder weinen?", *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 27-28 September 1958.

<sup>42</sup>Lupus, "Nun lachen sie darüber", *Münchner Abendzeitung*, 2 October 1958.

<sup>43</sup>Even before the film appeared in cinemas, the poster campaign for it had been deemed offensive. The poster's stylized picture of Chaplin as Hitler showed "a certain similarity to the posters used in the election campaigns of the 1930s.... It seems to us that it is beyond the pale to imprint the words 'He's finally coming' on these posters." "Endlich kommt er", *Der Kurier*, 25 August 1958.

<sup>44</sup>"'Diktator' kommt zur rechten Zeit", *Vorwärts*, 29 August 1958. Cp. Kersten, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup>Karena Niehoff, "Schweres Wiedererkennen", *Tagesspiegel*, 28 August 1958. Of course, Chaplin had in fact visited Germany, but only briefly.

concluded that “it does not make any sense to release this film today, and it is indeed dangerous, considering all the young people, who don’t know much more about the Nazis than Chaplin did in 1940.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, despite many positive reviews, critics were divided about the film’s enjoyability and potential offensiveness, its timeliness and the appropriateness of the audience’s laughter, as well as Chaplin’s understanding of Nazi Germany and the educational value of his satire. In addition to this critical debate, there also were right-wing protests against the film. It was reported that cinema managers showing *The Great Dictator* had received threatening letters and phone calls, and were considering taking out special insurance to cover themselves in the case of any damage being caused by protesters.<sup>47</sup> In 1960, a leading member of the Deutsche Reichspartei (DRP), a small, extreme right-wing group, was taken to court for trying to intimidate a cinema owner but was acquitted because the judge decided that his threat was not in fact credible.<sup>48</sup> In a related case, another DRP member was sentenced to six months in jail (but set free on probation) for disrespecting the somewhat controversial new German flag.<sup>49</sup> Obviously, tempers were running high, not only in right-wing circles, where the past and present identity of the German nation was concerned. To the detriment of its critical reception and popular success, *The Great Dictator* got caught up in these debates upon its release in 1958. Fifteen years later, however, the cultural climate in West Germany had become much more amenable to the film.

The press book for the 1973 re-release of *The Great Dictator* consisted of a series of articles written by Joe Hembus, a leading German film critic. In addition to outlining the production and reception history of the film, Hembus emphasized its uniqueness and its status as a masterpiece. He acknowledged the problems the film had encountered during its 1958 release, and offered two explanations. Firstly, the film, in particular its abrupt departure from traditional storytelling during the climactic speech, had simply been “ahead of its time”. Secondly, the audience had not been prepared for an entertaining treatment of the Nazi era. With regards to this latter point, Hembus noted an important recent development: “the emblems of fascism have become elements of pop art” and rock musicians “love to adorn themselves with swastikas”; indeed, some commentators had gone as far as describing fascism itself as “a form of pop culture”.<sup>50</sup> Hembus also identified a widespread revival, in Germany (and also other countries), of

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<sup>46</sup>Wolfgang Bartsch, “Ein filmisches Fossil”, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10 October 1958.

<sup>47</sup>Horst Treuke, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup>“Bundesfarben verunglimpft”, *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, 2 June 1960.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Cp. Schütte, op. cit.

interest in the figure of Hitler: "Hitler is 'in' like never before" with numerous book publications as well as TV and film productions. Thus, Hembus suggested that *The Great Dictator* would not only be acceptable to German audiences in 1973, but might even become a hit.

Hembus listed another, and arguably even more important, reason for the film's good prospects at the West German box office. *The Great Dictator* was the third film in a series of major theatrical re-releases in 1972/73 of Chaplin films by the German distributor Tobis, the first two being *Modern Times* and *City Lights*. In the light of the "sensational" box office performance especially of *Modern Times*, it was easy to see that Chaplin was just as 'in' as Hitler and Nazi-themed entertainment. Even before the full impact of the first Chaplin re-releases had been felt in West Germany, newspapers had registered an international Chaplin revival. In July 1972, for example, *Die Welt* reported about long queues outside a New York cinema showing *The Great Dictator*.<sup>51</sup> As in Germany, the film had been preceded in the US by *Modern Times* and *City Lights*, which had been re-released as part of the "current Chaplin boom across all of the Western world". Thus, in contrast to the German critical discourse in the immediate post-war period, which cast doubt on Chaplin's status as a popular entertainer, in 1972/73 this status was re-affirmed. The clearest sign of Chaplin's renewed appeal as an entertainer was the success of *Modern Times* at the West German box office; amazingly, this 36 year old movie was the seventh highest grossing film of 1972.<sup>52</sup>

To some extent, then, the enormous success of *The Great Dictator* in 1973 can be understood as a kind of echo of the impact of *Modern Times* (and, to a lesser extent, *City Lights*) the year before. Many of the people who had made *Modern Times* such a big hit must have returned to the cinema for more of Chaplin's comedy when *The Great Dictator* was released.<sup>53</sup> However, the child friendly rating of *Modern Times* (6 and older) and anecdotal evidence - including my own experiences as an 11 year old being taken to see Chaplin films in 1972/73 - suggest that a large segment of the audience for *Modern Times* was made up of parents and young children, who would have been excluded from *The Great Dictator* (with its 12 rating). Thus, in addition to Chaplin fans, to become a huge success *The Great Dictator* must also have appealed to other people

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<sup>51</sup>Hans Sahl, "Lachen aus sicherer Entfernung", *Die Welt*, 13 July 1972.

<sup>52</sup>Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany, op. cit., p. 130. TV broadcasts of Chaplin's films in the late 1960s and early 1970s also may have played a role. However, according to information in the *Zweitausendeins Lexikon des internationalen Films* (op. cit.), most of Chaplin's feature films were not shown on West German TV until the 1980s. An important exception is *The Gold Rush*, which was broadcast in 1969 and may well have contributed to a renewed interest in Chaplin. Another contributing factor were broadcasts of Chaplin's short films. Unfortunately, the *Lexikon* does not include any information on them, but, if my memory serves me well, they were broadcast as part of slapstick compilation programmes for children in the 1960s and early 1970s.

<sup>53</sup>Cp. "Und wenn die Welt zerplatzt!", *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, 9 March 1973.

who were probably attracted by its subject matter. In Hembus' analysis, these would be the people caught up in the Hitler and Nazi boom.

Before more closely examining the film's success in terms of its subject matter, it is useful to contextualize the Chaplin boom with respect to West German box office trends. By the early 1970s, Hollywood provided only about a third of the films in the West German market (down from almost half in the 1950s), yet its share of ticket sales had been increasing slightly, from about 15% in the 1950s to around 17% in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>54</sup> The number of Hollywood films (many of which were Anglo-American co-productions) in the annual top 10 rose from on average 1-2 in the 1950s, to 2-3 by the early 1970s.<sup>55</sup> In 1972, for the first time the majority of the top ten were American or Anglo-American films, and the top ten of 1973 included four such films, plus the Euro-American co-production *Last Tango in Paris*. Thus, the top ten success of *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* arose partly from a shift in the preferences of West German audiences away from domestic productions and towards American and Anglo-American imports (across the 1960s and early 1970s, continental European imports also featured more prominently in the annual top ten).

Since the 1920s, most of the American and Anglo-American films achieving top ten success in Germany had had European or Biblical subject matter, had often been based on European source material, had been set (as well as sometimes shot) in Europe, and had frequently featured European stars.<sup>56</sup> *The Great Dictator* - with its English-born star who had been living back in Europe since 1952 - clearly fit this pattern. A second group of successful Hollywood imports, which gained prominence in the late 1960s, were films specifically addressed to children (and their parents). This group included several Disney films, starting with *The Jungle Book*, which was the third most successful film of the 1968/69 season. Apart from American imports, numerous children's films produced in Germany, Sweden and France populated the annual top ten in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As mentioned above, due to its restrictive rating *The Great Dictator* does not fully belong to this trend; however, the great popularity of children's films helps to explain the success of *Modern Times* and thus the great prominence Chaplin gained in West Germany in the early 1970s which, as suggested above, in turn contributed to the success of *The Great Dictator*.

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<sup>54</sup>Garncarz, *Populäres Kino in Deutschland*, op. cit., p. 444.

<sup>55</sup>Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", op. cit., pp. 129-30.

<sup>56</sup>Cp. Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", pp. 103-4; Peter Krämer, "Hollywood in Germany/Germany in Hollywood", *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk, London: BFI, 2002, pp. 231-2.

A third trend among successful imports, which was quickly picked up by domestic producers, was the breaking of taboos. Beginning with the breakaway success of Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence* (the top hit of 1964/65), sex and extreme violence, together with other subjects which had previously been taboo (such as drug use), became very prominent in the annual top ten. Indeed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s sex films were the only genre rivalling the box office success of children's films. It is worth pointing out that comedy was central to both of these two contrasting cycles, and that the comedy of sex films was closely tied to the breaking of taboos. Even without graphic representations of sex and violence, *The Great Dictator* clearly participated in the spirit of (often comical) taboo breaking so characteristic of top ten films during this time, insofar as it confronted Germans with the country's Nazi past and did so, by and large, in a comical and entertaining fashion.

Of course, as Hembus indicates in the press book, breaking taboos in relation to the Nazi past had become a prominent feature of German culture by the early 1970s. Hence, the reviews of *The Great Dictator* no longer registered the film's transgressiveness as a problem, and instead embraced it as the source of satisfying laughter on the part of the audience. The overwhelmingly positive reviews of the film in 1973 tended to agree that the film made effective use of comedy to analyse and critique the Hitler cult and Nazi terror, and that the audience's laughter therefore deepened their historical and political understanding; at the same time, reviewers also acknowledged the sentimentality both of the story and of Chaplin's final speech, and, despite some misgivings, felt that this sentimentality added further complexity and emotional resonance to the film.<sup>57</sup>

Critics noted that the film had "puzzled and confused" audiences in the 1950s, because they had been too close to the historical past the film dealt with; however, "after another fifteen years, we should finally have gained sufficient distance" to "understand and admire" the film's "political analysis", art and comedy.<sup>58</sup> While the historical distance between the audience and the events the film dealt with was thus considered a crucial element of its impact in 1973, many critics stated that the film itself did not feel historically distant at all. Rather than being an old, old-fashioned and indeed obsolete movie - as had been suggested by several critics in 1958 -, *The Great Dictator* was now mostly regarded as a timeless masterpiece, which had something important to say to

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<sup>57</sup>See, for example, Günter Kriewitz, "Lächeln als Waffe", *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 6 March 1973; review of *The Great Dictator*, *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, 8 March 1973; Willy Haas, "Der große Diktator: Witz am Rande des Wahnsinns", *Die Welt*, 9 March 1973; Gert Berghoff, "Mutmaßungen über den Führer", *Kölner Rundschau*, 10 March 1973; Ponkie, review of *The Great Dictator*, *AZ* (Munich), 6 July 1973; Joachim Kaiser, "Chaplin zwischen Napoleon und Hitler", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11 July 1973.

<sup>58</sup>Günter Kriewitz, "Lächeln als Waffe", *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 6 March 1973. Cp. Schütte, op. cit.; Ponkie, op. cit.; "Entlarvender Chaplin", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 10 July 1973; and Schütte, op. cit.

each new generation and thus was forever timely.<sup>59</sup> Whereas critics and audiences in 1958 had often felt the film to be historically distant, but the events it portrayed to be historically too close, now the film was felt to be forever historically close while the events it portrayed were seen to be sufficiently distant.

This changing perception and experience of the film was, I think, underpinned by changes in audience composition and public opinion.<sup>60</sup> The West German cinema audience had gone into steep decline after 1956 and would only recover in the second half of the 1970s.<sup>61</sup> In the rapidly decreasing audience, cinemagoers from large cities made up an ever larger share of total admissions. People living in cities with a population of more than 100,000 made up about 30% of the cinema audience in 1956; by the early 1970s, this share had increased to almost 50%.<sup>62</sup> The most dramatic growth concerned people from large cities (500,000 inhabitants and more),<sup>63</sup> which, as we have seen, had traditionally been the best market for Chaplin films. Thus, the increasing urbanisation of the audience is a factor contributing to the success of *The Great Dictator* and other Chaplin films in the early 1970s.

Another factor is a shift in public opinion, especially among young, educated people, who became an increasingly important segment of the cinema audience. In 1956, those under 30 bought almost 60% of all tickets; in 1972, it was over 80%.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the audience became increasingly well educated. In 1965, just over 30% had more than the most basic education; by the early 1970s, this figure had risen to over 40%.<sup>65</sup> As we will shortly see, educated young people were at the forefront of several developments in public opinion across the 1960s and into the 1970s - reduced anti-semitism, ever more critical attitudes towards the Nazi past and to Germany in general, reduced patriotism -, all of which may have contributed to the acceptance and popularity of Chaplin's film.

To begin with, anti-semitism, which, as noted above, was still widespread in the immediate post-war years but declined across the 1950s, appears to have subsided

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<sup>59</sup>See especially Schütte, op. cit., and Berghoff, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup>Cp. Garncarz, *Populäres Kino in Deutschland*, op. cit., pp. 397-18.

<sup>61</sup>Stephanie Henseler, *Soziologie des Kinopublikums*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987, p. 26.

<sup>62</sup>Garncarz, *Populäres Kino in Deutschland*, op. cit., p. 301. Henseler (op. cit., p. 53) has slightly different figures, but the overall trend is the same.

<sup>63</sup>Henseler, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>64</sup>Garncarz, *Populäres Kino in Deutschland*, op. cit., p. 298; cp. Henseler, op. cit., pp. 33-5. Interestingly, the audience also became increasingly male. See Garncarz, pp. 300-1, and Henseler, pp. 38-41, 51-4.

<sup>65</sup>Henseler, op. cit., p. 43.

further in the 1960s.<sup>66</sup> An indirect measure of this is the growing support for Israel. For example, the share of respondents favoring "the closest possible cooperation" with Israel almost doubled from 13% in 1954 to 25% in 1972.<sup>67</sup> Surveys in the 1960s and 1970s found that anti-semitic attitudes were least pronounced among young, educated respondents. For example, in a 1975 survey only 9% of 16-29 year olds expressed intolerant attitudes towards Jews as compared to 32% of those 60 and over.<sup>68</sup>

Equally, support for Hitler, which had still been substantial in the immediate post-war period, had largely vanished by the early 1970s. For example, while 10% of respondents in a 1950 poll named Hitler in response to the question "Which great German, in your opinion, has done most for Germany?", in 1971 it was only 2%.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, while in 1951 42% of respondents named the period "(b)etween 1933 and 1939 (Third Reich before World War II)" in response to the question "When in this century do you feel things have gone best for Germany?", in 1970 it was only 5%.<sup>70</sup> Once again, young, educated respondents were least likely to give this answer.<sup>71</sup> An increasingly critical attitude towards the Nazi past is also registered in responses to two related questions: In 1948, 57% of respondents said that "National Socialism was a good idea that was badly put into practice"; in 1964 and 1978, by contrast, the majority of respondents (54% and 71% respectively) agreed that "the National Socialist government was an unjust government, a criminal regime".<sup>72</sup> Correspondingly, in the 1970s more people believed that resistance against the Nazi regime was both possible and necessary.<sup>73</sup>

Increasingly critical attitudes towards the German past also translated into a rise in negative opinions about Germany and the Germans in general, and a decline in patriotic feelings. When asked why "the Germans are unpopular throughout the world", an increasing share of respondents gave "(o)ur negative characteristics" as the reason:

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<sup>66</sup>Cp. Noelle and Neumann, op. cit., pp. 189-90, 192.

<sup>67</sup>Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls, 1967-1980*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981, p. 409. Also see pp. 467-8. Note, however, that the relationship with Israel and Jews remained a highly problematic issue. In 1979, 44% of respondents said that the statement "we should continue to feel guilty with regard to Israel" was so "controversial" that "even good friends might be at odds" about it. Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 59. Cp. Noelle and Neumann, op. cit., pp. 190-1. Here both educational and age differences become apparent. It is also interesting to note that women appeared to have been more anti-semitic than men. Not so surprising is the lesser degree of anti-semitism among left-liberal respondents as compared to conservatives.

<sup>69</sup>Noelle-Neumann, op. cit., p. 109. In response to the question whether "if it weren't for the war, Hitler would have been one of the greatest German statesmen", positive responses went down from 48% in 1955 and 41% in 1959 to 31% in 1978, while negative responses went up from 36% in 1955 and 42% in 1959 to 55% in 1978. Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 103

<sup>71</sup>Noelle and Neumann, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 197; Noelle-Neumann, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>73</sup>Cp. ibid., pp. 112-3, and Noelle and Neumann, op. cit., pp. 200-1.

45% in 1955 and 62% in 1975; the alternative answers were "(o)ur positive characteristics", down from 25% to 17%, and "(w)e are not unpopular", down from 14% to 7%.<sup>74</sup> Positive responses to the question "Are you proud to be a German?" declined from 76% of respondents in 1971 to 71% in 1976, which is, I think, an extension of a steady decline in national pride across the 1960s.<sup>75</sup> Once again, these developments were most pronounced amongst young people. Only 57% of 16-29 year olds said they were proud to be German in 1976 as opposed to 84% of those 60 and older. In 1975, 56% of the younger age group felt that the word "fatherland" "no longer suits our times", as opposed to only 17% of the oldest age group.<sup>76</sup>

These surveys indicate that, by the 1970s, trends in West German public opinion had prepared the ground for a more positive reception of *The Great Dictator* than it had received in the 1950s. In particular, a new generation of educated (and mostly urban) youth, born during or after the war and thus in no way complicit with the Nazi regime and its crimes, had emerged as the core audience for cinemas. Their willingness, perhaps even eagerness, to confront the Nazi past, and their critical attitudes towards this past, and towards Germany and the Germans in general, made them receptive for Chaplin's comic treatment of, and for his sermonizing about, the evils of fascism in *The Great Dictator*. In subsequent years, the same audience played an important role in turning other Nazi-themed films into top ten hits: the German documentary *Hitler - Eine Karriere* ('Hitler - A Career', no. 5 in 1977), Ingmar Bergman's Nazi drama *The Serpent's Egg* (no. 9 in 1977), the bestseller adaptation *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, no. 4 in 1979) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (no. 9 in 1981).<sup>77</sup> While, according to Joe Hembus, *The Great Dictator* was released on the back of a boom in Hitler representations and Nazi-themed entertainment, it would appear that the peak of that boom was not reached until a few years later.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Noelle-Neumann, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 106. It is also worth noting that, despite rising prosperity, the share of respondents who would have preferred to live in another country rose from 18% in 1953 to 24% in 1979. Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>76</sup>Similarly, in 1977 41% of 16-29 year olds said they did not like it "when you see the black-red-gold federal flag somewhere", as compared to only 17% of those 60 and older. Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>77</sup>There was also a revival of World War II combat films in the top ten after 1976, including *A Bridge Too Far* (no. 6 in 1977) and *Das Boot* (no. 6 in 1981). Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", op. cit., pp. 131-3.

<sup>78</sup>Arguably, this peak was the broadcast of the American mini-series *Holocaust* (1978) in January 1979. Cp. Peter Märtzheim and Ivo Frenzel (eds), *Im Kreuzfeuer: Der Fernsehfilm Holocaust. Eine Nation ist betroffen*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979.