

Hitler's Downfall,
As Perceived Through *Downfall*
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Nazi Holocaust – HIST133D

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Perception on the End of Hitler

The end of the Nazi Regime remembers the most horrific war-time that the human race has ever seen. World War II, a canonical event in human history, has been documented and studied with the purpose of preventing yet another genocide. The United Nations, for example, proposed the *Declarations of Human Rights* following the end of World War II.¹ In addition, and in an attempt to prevent any further atrocity from occurring once again, the The United Nations' drafted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. All of these measures have been put in place following the end of World War II in order to reinforce world order through the standardization of one attitude: genocide should never happen again. This 'standard', however, may be subjective in operation. Any post-World War II mention of Hitler and the Nazi Regime has the potential to be perceived differently upon consumption. Considering that the Holocaust is such a sensitive subject, the tolerance for discourse that even remotely sympathizes genocide is close to none– if not, an absolute zero. *Downfall (2004)* by Oliver Hirschbiegel is a film that provokes strong attitudes from its audience at a national level. The echoing devastations that the Holocaust imposed onto innocent bystanders, deemed 'other' by German rule, was brought to an end with the fall of Hitler and the bombing of the Berlin bunker– as portrayed by *Downfall*. The stark differences in American and German critiques on *Downfall* offer perspective on what may or may not be appropriate to convey in a post Hitler world.

Downfall, by Oliver Hirschbiegel, is set in April 1945 amidst World War II.² German director, Oliver Hirschbiegel, is well versed in war and documentary-style films.³ *Downfall* sets the scene in the Battle of Berlin, through the German perspective of those heavily intertwined in Hitler's proximity. *Downfall* earned an Oscar-nominee through its significant cinematic portrayals of Adolf Hitler's last days following the collapse of Nazi Germany in April 1945.⁴ The composition of *Downfall (2004)* is memoirs of Traudl Junge and the book *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary* by Junge and Melissa Müller.⁵ Junge was one of Hitler's secretaries during the Third Reich.⁶ In addition, *Downfall* is also based upon historical documents, interviews, and recordings narrating the events leading up to Hitler's death. However, before the release of Junge's memoirs in 2002, was Trevor Roper. Trevor Roper was a British historian who was assigned the task of conducting investigations in the form of interviews with as many people as possible in order to piece together a historical account of what truly transpired.⁷ His findings were published in 1947, which offered a detailed account of Hitler's final ten days and became

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 A (III), UN Doc A/810 (10 December 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

² *Downfall (Der Untergang)*, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel (2004; Munich: Constantin Film), PlutoTV.

³ IMDb, "Oliver Hirschbiegel - IMDb," accessed February 9, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0386570/>.

⁴ Bathrick, David, and Magshamrain, Rachel Leah. "Whose Hi/Story Is It? The U.S. Reception of 'Downfall.'" *New German Critique*, no. 102 (2007): 1–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669206>, p.1.

⁵ Wikipedia contributors. (2025, March 8). *Downfall (2004 film)*. Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downfall_\(2004_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downfall_(2004_film))

⁶ Wikipedia contributors *Downfall (2004 film)*.

⁷ Trevor-Roper, Hugh. "Hugh Trevor-Roper." Wikipedia. Last modified March 8, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Trevor-Roper.

Perception on the End of Hitler

the narrative of Hitler's final days at the time.⁸ The implications of Roper's findings were so impactful that the book received, "approval from British officials for publication after the conclusion of the war crime trials and was translated into multiple languages."⁹ However, despite the success, Roper's work was not perfect. The imperfection comes from holes in a historical timeline that arose from the inability to locate Hitler's body. *Downfall (2004)* is a film that fills in the vacant answers that Roper was unable to answer.¹⁰

Despite the damning credentials and thorough compilation of history that *Downfall* offers to its audience, public perception of *Downfall* follows no trend. German and American perspectives on the film *Downfall* offer insight into the attitudes that the film employed from its audience in 2004. Author John Bendix proposes 'meta-commentary' – understanding why considering film critique is important to understanding the implications of a film. Bendix, a political science professor with education from University of California, Berkeley, Amherst College, and Indiana University offers *Facing Hitler: German Responses to Downfall*.¹¹ Understanding 'why' analyzing public opinion is important because it acts as a 'conduit that gives voice to or criticizes what a director is trying to achieve and what the audience actually receives.'¹² With that, the comparing and contrasting of both German and American critiques allows for a generalized perception that each respective country has in regards to Nazi-Germany in the early 2000s.

To begin a 'meta-commentary', analyzing the film's performance may offer insight into the sheer impact that the film had in each respective location. To begin, *Downfall* performed considerably well in the United States, grossing a total of '\$5,501,940 by the end of October 2005.'¹³ While seemingly impressive, the contrary debut of *Downfall* in Germany is quite provoking. *Downfall* took Germany by storm, grossing to five times the cost of making the film just three months after being released in 2004.¹⁴ To quantify this, *Downfall's* budget was \$14,715,580.50 (USD).¹⁵ Five times the operating cost of *Downfall* amounts to over 15 times U.S. American gross (\$73,577,902.50 vs. \$5,501,940) – needless to say that these points are three months after the release (Germany) as compared to over a year (U.S. America). To calibrate this, in 2004, U.S.-America had a population of 293,655,404¹⁶ while Germany had 82,500,000.¹⁷ This information, while damning, supports the claim that *Downfall* had a larger

⁸ Marcuse, Harold. University of California Santa Barbara 2025.

⁹ Trevor-Roper, Wikipedia.

¹⁰ Marcuse, Harold.

¹¹ Prabook. 2025. "John Steven Bendix." Accessed March 11, 2025. https://prabook.com/web/john_steven.bendix/1705693.

¹² Bendix, John, p. 71.

¹³ Bathrick and Magshamrain, p. 1.

¹⁴ Bendix, John, p. 78.

¹⁵ *Downfall*, IMDb, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0363163/>.

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Population for the United States and States, and for Puerto Rico: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2004," released December 22, 2004, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/tables/2000-2004/state/totals/nst-est2004-01.pdf>.

¹⁷ Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), "Population by nationality and sex 1970 to 2023 in Germany," accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Current-Population/Tables/Irbev02a.html>.

Perception on the End of Hitler

and more generalizable effect on its population than that of the United States. While *Downfall* may have done well in consideration to it being a foreign film in the United States, ultimately German consumption of *Downfall* trumped the United States disproportionately. With that, the conclusion to be drawn from this is perhaps that, in 2004-2005, Americans were less intrigued than Germans on the topic of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Germany will carry the tarnished legacy that Hitler has left behind so long that it is a canonical (thus taught and studied) event.

Following this, Germany's response to *Downfall* was an overwhelmingly positive reaction. In understanding the impact that *Downfall* had, Bendix reveals that, "German schools were already making it part of their history curriculum."¹⁸ This suggests that the German mass believed *Downfall* to be a representative story that is compelling enough to teach children and generations to follow. Consequently, the film was deemed scholarly to the point of implementation into a widely practiced curriculum. This then reflects Germany's ongoing process of grappling with its past. Doctor Marcuse often emphasizes the meta-cognitive approach to learning in the discipline of history. Germany adding *Downfall* to its curriculum means that it was important enough to include in a somewhat 'canon within a canon.' *Downfall* serves as a tool for reflection for the German people—empowering the next generation to understand the emotional and moral intricacies of a tragedy facilitated by its own government. To reiterate, this is all in an attempt to deter from genocidal tendencies in the future, as the Holocaust has certainly sullied Germany – fiscally and shamefully. On the contrary, (however, still in support of the idea that German attitude towards *Downfall* is representative of a preventive measure to genocide), Bendix offers Wim Wender, a German scholar and critic. Wender is highly critical of *Downfall* and writes, "this is a film not about the tragedy of the murder of Jews and other "undesirables," but instead the telling, as tragedy, of the downfall of the Nazi project."¹⁹ Wender's criticism of *Downfall* reflects a deeper, underlying fear of the resurgence of genocide or Nazism in Germany. By focusing on the tragic demise of the Nazi leadership rather than the suffering of their victims, Wender fears that *Downfall* could shift public perception in a way that diminishes the atrocities that were facilitated by the Third Reich.

On the other hand, the *considerably*²⁰ overwhelming positive reception to *Downfall* in Germany highly contradicts the U.S. American attitudes towards *Downfall* that were not so welcoming. The U.S. American perspective on *Downfall* is demonstrated by scholars David Bathrick and Leah Magshamrain of the prestigious universities of Cornell and National College of Industrial Relation. Julia Saloman, selected by Bathrick and Magshamrain to portray a dissatisfactory concern with the implications of *Downfall*, writes, "The lack of narrative position alone takes the audience into a black hole in which they are led, almost unnoticeably, toward looking at this time through the eyes of the perpetrators, thereby generating a kind of benevolent

¹⁸ Bendix, John, p. 78.

¹⁹ Bathrick and Magshamrain, p.81.

²⁰ Overall, it is fair to claim that the mass German population received *Downfall* in a positive manner. The previous paragraph includes a quote criticising the film, however this single criticism is not representative of the sheer support that the film received. It must be noted that there will always be critique on the media, despite the greatness, or even influence that it may have on the overwhelming general public. A contrary will never cease to exist.

understanding of them.”²¹ Saloman’s main concern is that the film leaves viewers vulnerable to an emotional connection with the perpetrators of the Holocaust. The U.S.-American general public seemed more preoccupied with the concern that a film like *Downfall* was simply creating sympathy for Hitler and Nazi Germany as a whole. To add, Soloman is not alone in this thinking. Bathrick also addresses this anxiety by emphasizing that the film is, “not Hitler at all, but rather his followers: the officers, bureaucrats and loyal civilians who were with him at the end.”²² Bathrick’s concern directly contradicts Germany’s response to instituting *Downfall* as a film to be studied by German students. Bathrick’s withdrawal, presumably representative of other scholars, stresses an anxiety about the assumption that a film viewer might be under while watching. This discrepancy can be understood simply: *Downfall*, if taken at face value, allows for an assumption that Hitler was not the main source of evil behind the Holocaust. This of course, then boils down to the fundamental argument of intentionalism versus structuralism and functionalism.

However, despite differences in opinion on the ideologies that fueled the Nazi Holocaust, both Germany and America ironically seek to achieve the same goal. Both Germany and the U.S. American attitudes intend to deter any potential ‘seeds’ of Hitler to be spread. Especially with globalization, the world is simply too vulnerable to face an evil like Hitler today. To put it plainly, globalization and modern technology would be a hearth that fuels any ember of evil akin to Hitler— thus requiring the modern world to be extremely benevolent in taking preventative measures. Bathrick and Magshamrain note that the discussions surrounding *Downfall* and its broader implications were largely parallel between the United States and Germany.²³ In both countries, the central concerns revolved around whether Germans should be allowed to produce films about Hitler at all, whether it is appropriate to depict Hitler as a "normal" human being, and whether he should be portrayed realistically.²⁴ Most importantly, there was well grounded academic discussion about whether it was acceptable to depict the German people and Nazis as victims, rather than as the perpetrators of atrocities.²⁵ The question of whether it is acceptable to portray Hitler as a "normal" human being is especially significant in this context. This could lead to a dangerous "humanizing" of such historical figures, allowing future generations to forget the essential moral judgment that must be made about their actions.

Regardless of a common goal, the overarching message to be taken from *Downfall* has been wildly misconstrued. While some critics argue that the film reduces Hitler’s role in facilitating the Holocaust – like commenting that the story that *Downfall* tells is “not Hitler at all, but rather his followers,²⁶” (as previously mentioned) – this tunnel-vision approach is not representative of the depictions in the film. By portraying Hitler’s descent into paranoia and self-destruction, the film indirectly challenges the myth of his supposed strategic brilliance and

²¹ Bathrick and Magshamrain, p.3.

²² Bathrick and Magshamrain, p. 9.

²³ Bathrick and Magshamrain p.2.

²⁴ Bathrick and Magshamrain p.2.

²⁵ Bathrick and Magshamrain p.2.

²⁶ Bathrick and Magshamrain, p. 9.

Perception on the End of Hitler

nationalist devotion. In fact, the positions that critics hold is an outright intentionalist perspective that places the sole responsibility of World War II on Hitler. As we know, this is highly unlikely. Instead, a functionalist perspective argues that Hitler's accomplices were complacent in a bureaucratic system that allowed him to give orders that were carried-out without question. The portrayal of Hitler in *Downfall* does not inherently erase the culpability of his followers or the wider German society that enabled his rise. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that in the early 2000s, following the release of *Downfall*, a wide majority of the public still believed in an 'intentionalist' framework in the Nazi Holocaust.

Overall, analyzing public opinion in film is crucial, yet requires subjectivity in interpreting the results to amount to something that is meaningful. In understanding both American and German perspectives on such a momentous film like *Downfall*, one main takeaway should be drawn: both German and U.S. Americans are increasingly wary in breeding a new Adolf Hitler.

Annotated Bibliography

Bathrick, David, and Magshamrain, Rachel Leah. "Whose Hi/Story Is It? The U.S. Reception of 'Downfall.'" *New German Critique*, no. 102 (2007): 1–16.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669206>.

Relevance: U.S. reception of *Downfall* was used in comparison to the reception of *Downfall* by the German public in order to draw a parallel between attitudes on post World War II.

Downfall (Der Untergang), directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel (2004; Munich: Constantin Film), PlutoTV.

Relevance: *Downfall* is the topic at large. *Downfall* is a film by Oliver Hirschbiegel released in 2004, highlighting the fall of the Nazi Regime and the last days of Hitler in the Berlin Bunker in April 1945.

Downfall, IMDb, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0363163/>.

Relevance: IMDb or, 'Internet Movie Database', is a resource used to compile information on directors, actors, films, movies, etc..

IMDb, "Oliver Hirschbiegel - IMDb," accessed February 9, 2025,

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0386570/>.

Relevance: IMDb or, 'Internet Movie Database', is a resource used to compile information on directors, actors, films, movies, etc.. Oliver Hirschbiegel's IMDb profile offers background experience and career accomplishments in order to establish credibility for his work, *Downfall*.

Marcuse, Harold. University of California Santa Barbara 2025.

Relevance: Harold Marcuse is a professor of German History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In HIST133D– History of the Nazi Holocaust–, Marcuse mentions the work of Trevor Roper and his influence on the content of film *Downfall*.

Prabook. 2025. "John Steven Bendix." Accessed March 11, 2025.

https://prabook.com/web/john_steven.bendix/1705693.

Relevance: Biography of author John Steven Bendix and his accomplishments, education, and publications in order to establish credibility as his source was heavily referenced.

United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 A (III), UN Doc A/810 (10 December 1948),

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

Relevance: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a compilation of thirty (30) articles encompassing naturalized rights for all man. Coupled with the thirty (30) articles is an abstract that outlines the reasoning as to why human rights are necessary to the progression of the human race as a collective unit. This declaration is of relevance as it was written in response to the violation of human rights that occurred during the Nazi-Holocaust under Adolf Hitler.

Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), "Population by nationality and sex 1970 to 2023 in Germany," accessed March 11, 2025,

<https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Current-Population/Tables/lrbev02a.html>.

Relevance: Used in comparison to census data in the United States of America to proportion the effect size that *Downfall* had in each respective country. Germany, despite

Perception on the End of Hitler

having a significantly smaller population, had an astronomically larger outreach in regards to the film than compared to the United States of America.

Trevor-Roper, Hugh. "Hugh Trevor-Roper." Wikipedia. Last modified March 8, 2025.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Trevor-Roper.

Relevance: Trevor Roper fueled the narrative of the last days of Hitler through his conducting of interviews of those closest to Hitler following the bombing of the Berlin Bunker. Of the narratives, Ropers work – coupled with additional narratives published later– set the groundwork for the plot of *Downfall*.

U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Population for the United States and States, and for Puerto Rico: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2004," released December 22, 2004,

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/tables/2000-2004/state/totals/nst-est2004-01.pdf>.

Relevance: Offers statistical information on census in the United States of America in order to proportionalized the effect size that *Downfall* had in terms of box-office sales and outreach. The outreach is important to understand as the argument is public perception, and in considering this outreach is relevant.

Wikipedia contributors. (2025, March 8). *Downfall* (2004 film). Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downfall_\(2004_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downfall_(2004_film))

Relevance: The inner-workings of *Downfall* solidifies any questions that the reader may have about source information, which was summarized in the work to eliminate and alleviate confusion. Understanding the content of a film, and what it is based on is a meta-cognitive approach that allows for the establishing of credibility in assessing any overarching themes.