

Commentary...

A tale for our times

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

We're finally catching up to the third season of the international hit German TV series "Babylon Berlin" on Netflix.

It's supposedly the most expensive production in German history, and it shows — the production values are extraordinary, and they transport the viewer into this strange noirish world of the late 1920s and early 1930s, where cultural drift and decadence intertwines with extremely violent political tribalism.

It's a tale for our times.

Adding to the piquancy of the tale is that the viewer is aware of a looming shadow that the characters cannot yet see: In a few short years, cynicism and the desire for change and order will see the radical fringe National Socialist German Workers Party voted into power — and the world will never be the same.

The Weimar Republic rose when Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated the throne as Germany sought the Armistice that ended the First World War. The fledgling democracy was never very robust, and it owed its very existence to right wing paramilitaries known as Freikorps that put down a Communist uprising in 1919.

But by 1929, when "Babylon Berlin" opens, prospects were actually pretty decent: While there was still considerable unemployment and some areas of grotesque urban poverty and blight, Germany had recovered from a savage period of hyper-inflation in 1923–24 and many Berliners were enjoying an era of prosperity. The institutions of the Republic were bumping along reasonably well, upheld in Berlin by the "Rote Burg," the Red Castle

that housed the metropolitan police.

They had their work cut out for them, because Berlin was one wild town — its flamboyant eroticism earning the city the moniker "Babylon on the Spree."

In Season 1, Gereon Rath, a young police inspector from Cologne, is transferred to Berlin to crack a pornography ring run by organized criminals of the Berlin underworld. As the great crime writer Jim Thompson would have it, the overarching plot of "Babylon Berlin" is the foundation of all noir fiction: Things aren't what they seem.

What at first glance appears to be simply a matter of extortion soon reveals itself to be a scandal that will forever change the lives of both Gereon and his closest associates. Together with stenotypist Charlotte Ritter and his partner Bruno Wolter, Rath is confronted with a tangled web of corruption, drug dealing, and weapons trafficking, forcing him into an existential conflict as he is torn between loyalty and uncovering the truth.

Mix Communists of both Stalinist and Trotskyite flavors and the specter of the Nazis, and things get very interesting indeed.

"Babylon Berlin" should be watched first of all because it is a fine, immersive historical crime drama that will hit anyone with a taste for golden age noir right where they live. And it must be watched in German with English subtitles, because dubbed versions are always lame.

It is also instructive to ponder upon the subtext: What happens when a society loses faith in its institutions and confidence in its culture?

For Weimar, Germany was the living embodiment of the first stanza of William

Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

The Weimar Republic tried to hold the center, and in 1929, it seemed that it might just pull it off, despite the fervent radicalism that pitted streetfighters of the left and the right against each other and against the police — who, though corrupt, were nevertheless the bulwark against mere anarchy loosed upon the world. But the Wall Street Crash of 1929 knocked the pins out of the world economy, and Germany could not stand. The hard-won and always-compromised stability of the Weimar Republic was lost in the crisis and the door was

opened to Adolf Hitler.

There was nothing inevitable about any of it. The German left wing was the most robust and the most militant in Europe and it could easily have been the Communists who took over. In fact, it was the terror that the middle classes held of a Bolshevik Revolution in Germany that led them into the arms of Brownshirts. And the leftists hated each other as much or more than they hated the rightists, because they were, at the core, fanatical exponents of a secular religion who despised apostasy above all sins.

A society plunging headlong into modernity, with all of its creativity and all of its dislocation, where meaningful work was always hard to come by, where radicals of varying stripes held out absolute answers to all the tough questions, where sex and drugs and frenetic jazz held out the allure of oblivion — all of this is both exotic and familiar to us.

It's quite a ride — and an interesting account of what happens when the going gets weird and the weird turn pro.

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