

## Film Review: *Murderers Among Us* (October 16, 1946)

### Abstract

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Die Mörder sind unter uns [*Murderers Among Us*] was the first German film released after the Allied-imposed film break [Filmpause], during which Germans were not allowed to make films; the film was released by DEFA, the GDR's state-owned film studio. Hitler's utilization of film to further his vision of Nazi Germany meant that Germans had to reckon with the medium and decide what form it would take and what place it would have in postwar Germany. Wolfgang Staudte, the film's director, approached the occupying American, British, and French powers for permission to make *Murderers Among Us*, but was rejected. He received permission from the Soviets to make the film—they believed that film would be a valuable tool to re-educate the German populace. The Soviets demanded a change to the ending of the film: instead of having Dr. Mertens, the hero of the film, shoot the principal villain, a former Nazi, they had Mertens hand the villain over to the authorities; they feared that audiences might interpret the original ending as an invitation for vigilante justice, and instead chose to show how ordinary citizens could contribute to the effort of denazification.

### Source

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#### A Brilliant Start for New German Cinema at the Opera House

Yesterday, the DEFA film *Murderers Among Us* premiered in the presence of high officials from the military government, the central administration and the municipal authorities, orchestra seats filled with virtually every significant representative of Berlin's cultural life. This was not the kind of film premiere we have already experienced in the hundreds; it was a very special event that the people attending will likely never forget. It was the first major German film made after the collapse of the Third Reich, the first film made by a German production company and with an exclusively German cast, in short, a purely German film. But it was much, much more. It was not a film made for entertainment, but a film whose plot takes us to the heart of present-day Germany, full of the problems that occupy us day and night, chock-full of all the hardships and difficulties with which the new democratic Germany is passionately trying to come to grips.

And this film was a good one. Had there been evidence of the technical problems we struggle with everywhere nowadays, it would have been understandable and forgivable. However, and this was perhaps the most moving thing about this entire event, this was by no means the case. The film is an admirable achievement technically, while the performances are as fine as anything produced in Germany before 1933. As director and screenwriter, Wolfgang Staudte has catapulted himself into the midst of the best in his profession. The film never drags, there are no dead stretches; the fate of the surgeon Dr. Mertens, who is rescued by a woman from despair and psychic barbarization, is cinematically convincing. The cameramen, Friedl Behn-Grund and Eugen Klagemann, have shot the film so splendidly that the audience rightly broke into spontaneous applause on several occasions.

This screening was an event, an event not just for Berlin, but for all of Germany. It documents not just an astonishing piece of cultural reconstruction but also the clearly stated will to contribute, through the artistic means of cinema, to the psychic and moral liquidation of a fatal past.

We will return to this achievement in detail in the next issue.

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