

***Kreuzzug des Weibes* [Woman's Crusade] (1926)**

Abstract

The 1926 silent film *Kreuzzug des Weibes* [Woman's Crusade], directed by Martin Berger, engaged directly in the era's heated debates about abortion, making a clear and emotional case for women's and families' right to make their own reproductive choices. Its plot criticized the double standard at work in most modern societies, in which the wealthy manage to work their way around legal obstacles, while the poor face prosecution. This clip shows some of the film's pivotal scenes. In the opening scenes, a poor mother of four dies as the result of a self-induced abortion to which she had to resort when no doctor would agree to help her. The authorities even decide to prosecute her husband as an accomplice to her illegal act of desperation. Meanwhile, a wealthy woman uses her connections and money to secure a medical abortion without penalty. When a third woman, a young teacher, is sexually assaulted by her apartment caretaker's mentally ill son, her doctor agrees to assist with an abortion, but the young teacher's fiancé — an obstinately by-the-book legal prosecutor—insists that all terminated pregnancies deserve punishment. In the climactic scene, however, the prosecutor undergoes a change of heart after experiencing a haunting vision in which all of the victims of bungled, illegal abortions march slowly past him. German activists increasingly pushed in the 1920s for the reform of Paragraph 218 of the German Criminal Code, which criminalized abortions and stipulated prison sentences for anyone who received, performed, or aided in an abortion. The reform movement celebrated a small victory in spring 1926, when a new law reduced the crime of abortion from a felony to a misdemeanor, thereby reducing its punishment as well. Several months later, on October 1, 1926, *Kreuzzug des Weibes* enjoyed its Berlin premiere and quickly became a box office hit, despite the ongoing and formidable pushback from social conservatives, including the Catholic Center Party and church leaders.

Source

Intertitles:

“...this complaint has been made to us. I consider an arrest to be necessary.”
[Prosecutor signs the arrest warrant.]

Arrest warrant. The arrest of the working-class couple... is hereby ordered on the strong suspicion of having violated §§ 218/219 (crimes against developing life). Signature

Doctor: “Why didn't you heed my warning?”

Teacher: “Couldn't you have saved these poor people from disaster?”

Doctor: “No! The law only allows this medical assistance in very exceptional cases.”

[Man enters the apartment.]

Detective Inspector Dr. Manning.

[Manning tells the husband he will have to arrest him and his wife.]

Doctor: “The wife is dead! Do you still have to arrest the husband under these circumstances?”

[Manning shows him the warrant, issued for both spouses. The teacher recognizes the signature of her fiancée, the district attorney.]

[Manning arrests the husband, the teacher looks after the couple's children.]

[...]

[The doctor argues with the prosecutor.]

Doctor: “In this case, economic hardship and the fear that the child would suffer from illness were the

cause.”

Prosecutor: “No! It is moral looseness!”

Doctor: “The deep maternal instinct of these women only allows them to act in this way under extreme duress!”

[He shows the prosecutor a German copy of Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798)].

“The poverty and misery arising from a too rapid increase of population had been distinctly seen, and the most violent remedies proposed, so long ago as the times of Plato and Aristotle.

[...] I am inclined to think that, from the prevailing opinions respecting population, which undoubtedly originated in barbarous ages, and have been continued and circulated by that part of every community which may be supposed to be interested in their support, we have been prevented from attending to the clear dictates of reason and nature on this subject.

War is the great pest of the human race. The ambition of princes would want instruments of destruction, if the distresses of the lower classes of people did not drive them under their standards. The legislators and statesmen of each country, adverting principally to the means of offense and defense, encouraged an increase of people in every possible way.”

[Prosecutor scoffs.]

Prosecutor: “We could only take other paths if women restrained themselves, did not succumb to a momentary desire and then tried to shirk the consequences!”

“...in any case, it still is murder and...” [he points to the Ten Commandments on the wall of his office.]

Thou shalt not kill.

Doctor: “Eliminating a diseased seed is for the good of the people and is not murder, but...”

[The image of a military cemetery appears on the wall.]

Prosecutor: “War is born out of political necessity and cannot be equated with the killing of germinating life.”

[...]

[The teacher has been raped by a mentally disabled man. She seeks the doctor's help.]

Teacher: “So it is not permissible for me to be relieved of a child that I was not responsible for creating?”

“And the state would discharge me from the civil service if I became a mother through no fault of my own?”

Doctor: “Prove your innocence to the state.”

“Excuse me. I would never impose such an unreasonable demand on you of my own accord.”

Teacher: “My whole life is destroyed - I will lose my fiancée, too. He is a jurist.”

[...]

[Doctor argues with the prosecutor again.]

Doctor: “A young woman has become the victim of an assault. She has realized she is pregnant and is asking for my help. What should I do?”

Prosecutor: “You know the law!”

Doctor: “She fears losing her fiancé and her position if she is not freed from this disgrace.”

Prosecutor: “Why? If she is truly not to blame for this disgrace?”

Doctor: “Would you accept it?”

Prosecutor: “Please refrain from asking personal questions.”

[...]

[Prosecutor is in his office. He has visions of his fiancé collapsing dead on the floor after having taken cyanide. The ghosts of the many women who have died during illegal abortions begin haunting him.]

BArch

Recommended Citation: Kreuzzug des Weibes [Woman's Crusade] (1926), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:video-5204>> [March 16, 2026].