

Poland's aching war legacy preserved on film

Saturday, July 21, 2007
© Jeff Heinrich

Neighbours in peacetime but enemies in war, Poland and Germany are two countries with a common fate.

The Second World War began in Poland, more than 3 million people died in the Holocaust there, and the sad legacy is kept alive in the countless movies inspired by all the destruction and slaughter.

Today, on the eve of what Polish communists and their masters in Moscow used to mark as the country's National Liberation Day, let's look at some of the best films set in wartime Poland.

But first, a little history.

Sixty-three years ago, on July 21, 1944, the Soviet Union created a provisional communist government for Poland, usurping the actual Polish government in exile in London.

The puppet rulers' manifesto – we'll fight the Nazis, nationalize industry, reform society and shut out the West with a new border – was published the next day, signposting Moscow's dominion over the Poles.

When liberation came six months later, Poland became a Soviet satellite behind the Iron Curtain, and July 22 was made a national holiday. It only stopped being a holiday many years later, in 1990, when Poland became independent again.

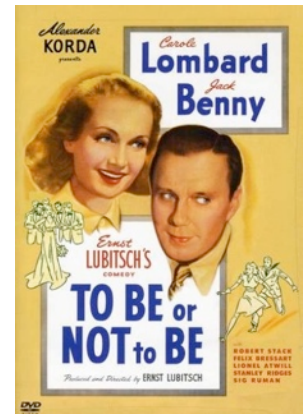
OK, now about those DVDs:



A Generation (*Poland, 1955*) The first part of Andrzej Wajda's war trilogy (followed by *Kanal* in 1957 and *Ashes and Diamonds* in 1958), this coming-of-age film follows the exploits of a young resistance fighter in 1943 who learns there's more to the struggle against the German occupiers than meets the eye. It's really all about moral ambiguity and competing interests: communist trade unionists, Polish nationalists and people who hedge their bets by backing both. On DVD from Criterion in a box set with the other two films and numerous extras.

The Gleiwitz Case (*East Germany, 1961*) A harrowing, 60-minute recreation of the phony border incident that sparked the start of the war. On August 31, 1939 the SS staged a fake raid on the radio station of Gleiwitz in Upper Silesia (then part of Germany, now part of Poland). The Germans made it look like they'd been attacked by Polish irregulars, and Hitler used the raid as a justification to invade the following day. A DEFA (Deutsche Film) production out of communist East Germany, the film is stunningly shot. On DVD from First Run Features, a New York company.

To Be or Not to Be (*U.S., 1942*) A satirical comedy about Nazi-occupied Poland in the middle of the war? That's what Ernst Lubitsch dared to do with this Hollywood picture. It's about a Warsaw theatre troupe led by a feuding married couple (Jack Benny and Carole Lombard) who try to outwit the Gestapo and escape to freedom. It's light, witty and ultimately tragic: Lombard died in a plane crash three weeks after production wrapped. The Warner DVD comes with two extras featuring Benny: a war-bonds promo and a 1930 comedy short called *The Rounder*.



The Tin Drum (*West Germany/France/Poland/Yugoslavia, 1979*) Volker Schlöndorff's feature about the rise of fascism in the German-Polish city of Danzig (Gdansk) in the 1920s and '30s won the 1980 Oscar for best foreign-language film. Based on the novel by Günter Grass, it's the story of Oskar Matzerath (David Bennent), a precocious little boy whose glass-shattering screams and tin-drum rolls wreak havoc among the local Nazis. Another superb Criterion DVD, in a fully loaded two-disc edition.

The Pianist (*France/Germany/Britain/Poland, 2002*) Filmed in several locations in Germany, as well as in Warsaw, this Holocaust epic won Oscars in 2003 for director Roman Polanski and lead actor Adrien Brody. It's the true story of Polish classical pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Jew whose world is shattered when the Nazis invade. His life is one of constant movement, from family apartment to ghetto to forced-labour camp. He finally escapes and finds a hiding place to sit out the war (the best part of the picture). TVA Films' three-disc, limited-edition DVD has the Chopin soundtrack on CD.



And from overseas: **Passenger** (*Poland, 1963*) A superb Holocaust drama in art-house style. In a series of flashbacks, a former Auschwitz concentration camp guard recalls her wartime relationship with a female inmate. Andrzej Munk, the film's young new-wave director, was killed

in a car crash while making the film; the footage was later assembled into a one-hour cut. The newly released DVD from the small British label Second Run is coded Region 0, which means it can play on normal players here; get it from amazon.co.uk.

© *Jeff Heinrich*