



The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

By Stefan Soldovieri

Why remake? Since the beginnings of the medium, film industries have engaged in remaking as a way of capitalizing on the success of past productions. By updating popular subjects, exchanging national settings (in the context of transnational remakes, for instance), or simply exploiting advances in sound, color, and other technologies, remakes have consistently offered a successful strategy for risk-averse film industries. Yet remaking was not a prominent production strategy at the state-owned DEFA Studio, where the return on investment was frequently measured in potential educational and ideological, as opposed to financial outcomes. Few DEFA films were remakes and even fewer East German productions were themselves reprised. From this perspective, Konrad Wolf's *Professor Mamlock*—which is based on the 1933 exile play by his father, Friedrich Wolf, and preceded by a 1938 Soviet screen adaptation—is unusual in the history of East German cinema.

Premiering at East Berlin's Colosseum cinema on 17 May 1961, just months before the erection of the Berlin Wall, the postwar *Professor Mamlock* emerged on the cusp of the New Wave cinemas of eastern and western Europe and efforts at aesthetic renewal at DEFA. It was one of the few DEFA productions to receive exposure on the other side of the inter-German border, airing on West German television in the early 1970s. While the film's message about the urgency of political action harmonized with DEFA's antifascist films of the previous decades, it also expanded on such heroic narratives of resistance by acknowledging the existence of everyday fascism in German society. The visual style of Konrad Wolf's *Professor Mamlock*, however, contrasts with these DEFA productions as well as the Soviet adaptation by Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin that preceded it. Inspired by the avant-garde leftist films of the Weimar Republic, Wolf's use of associative editing, oblique camera angles, point-of-view camerawork, and a stylized, often starkly symmetrical organization of space deviated from the aesthetics of Socialist Realism favored by GDR culture officials.¹ In terms of Konrad Wolf's own trajectory as a director, *Professor Mamlock* has been seen as a transitional work toward the more open form and complex perspectives of films like *Ich war 19 (I Was Nineteen)*.² Yet Wolf's film is not just an aesthetic update of DEFA's narratives of antifascism, in general, or its eponymous 1938 Soviet precursor, in particular. Putting the different variants of "Professor Mamlock" in the context of remakes, Konrad Wolf's homage to the drama written by his father some three decades earlier appears as an act of recovery that restores the plight of the Jew Mamlock to the center of the narrative.

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

The Play

Born in 1888 in Neuwied on the Rhine, the son of a Jewish merchant, Friedrich Wolf completed his medical studies in 1912 and served as a medic on the Western Front, an experience that turned him into an opponent of war. A respected author by the end of the 1920s, he joined the German Communist Party in 1928 and went on to establish, in 1932, a Communist agitprop group that achieved national attention. With the transfer of power to the Nazis in 1933, Wolf left Germany, first going to Switzerland and France, then settling with his family in Moscow the next year. In 1937, Wolf left the Soviet Union to support the International Brigades fighting the Spanish Civil War, but was stranded in Paris, where he was eventually arrested with the outbreak of the Second World War. He was able to return to Moscow in 1941 and eventually relocated with his family to Germany's eastern sector in 1945. One of early East Germany's most acclaimed authors, Friedrich Wolf's works were widely read in the GDR and a number of his works were filmed by DEFA, including Kurt Maetzig's *Der Rat der Götter* (*Council of the Gods*, 1950) and Martin Hellberg's biopic, *Thomas Müntzer* (1956).³

Friedrich Wolf was already a renowned literary figure when he composed his drama about the plight of Professor Mamlock. His 1929 drama "Cyankali" had contributed to a national abortion debate in Germany and resulted in a brief prison sentence for the playwright; but it was "Professor Mamlock," written in French exile, which established his reputation beyond Germany's borders. The play was performed on major international stages in the 1930s, premiering on 19 January 1934 in a Yiddish production at Warsaw's Jewish Kaminski Theater. It was first performed in the German language in Zurich on 8 November 1934, as "Professor Mannheim," and opened in Germany after the war amid protests on the part of the German authorities. When the play ultimately premiered on 9 January 1946 at Berlin's Hebbel Theater, Friedrich Wolf had returned from exile in Moscow to the Soviet Occupied Zone of East Berlin.

Written before the full extent of the future catastrophe of the Holocaust could be imagined and in the hopes that communist resistance could halt the spread of Nazism, Friedrich Wolf's play offers a warning about the consequence of political inaction in troubled times. The basis for the Soviet Lenfilm and DEFA films, the play tells the story of Hans Mamlock, an assimilated German Jew, respected surgeon, and proud veteran of WWI. His tragic flaw is an unwavering belief in bourgeois humanism that blinds him to the virulence of the anti-Semitism and political radicalism erupting around him. Mamlock's son Rolf—unlike his patriotic father, who tries to keep politics out of his surgical clinic, insisting that "Here [...] there are only doctors and patients, patients and doctors"—is involved in producing antifascist pamphlets as part of a communist underground organization. The son lives by the play's introductory quotation of Danton in 1792: "To conquer the enemies of the fatherland, we need daring, more daring, daring now and always."

The majority of the action—the only other dramatic location is the Mamlock home—takes place in Mamlock's hospital, which serves as a microcosm of the spectrum of German social dispositions toward Jews. The nurse Simon is a devoted supporter of the benevolent patriarch Mamlock, a frequent blood donor

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

for patients, and himself a Jew threatened with dismissal when the issue of racial legislation barring Jews from working in German hospitals arises. Mamlock shows his solidarity with the few Jews in his practice by placing his own name on the list of employees to be fired, even though he has been exempted by a supplementary decree for veterans. Despite such humiliations—and even after his daughter, Ruth, is driven from her school amidst cries of “Judens raus!”—he refuses to consider leaving Germany. Dr. Inge Ruoff, who sympathizes for most of the play with the ideals of the Nazi cause and its promise of national renewal and racial purification, is in love with Rolf and in the final scene ultimately distances herself from the fanatical Nazi commissar of the clinic, Dr. Hellpach. Mamlock’s dying words entreat Inge to join his communist son, Rolf, in finding a “new path,” a different path from his own suicide, which in his dying moments he appears to regret as an act of selfishness (“In the end one only thinks of oneself.”) Dr. Seidel is the editor-in-chief of a newspaper and a former schoolmate of Mamlock’s. A supporter of the conservative President Hindenburg, like Mamlock, Seidel requires an operation and refuses to be treated by anyone but the consummate Mamlock. Yet first Seidel betrays Mamlock, by refusing to print a rebuttal of libellous public accusations about how he runs the hospital, and then by signing a statement—written by Hellpach—attesting to Mamlock’s allegedly seditious statements about the new Nazi regime. But it is the disloyalty of his wartime friend Dr. Carlsen that causes Mamlock the most anguish, when he, too, signs the insidious document and takes over the hospital on Hellpach’s orders. Shortly thereafter, Mamlock takes his own life after refusing to put his name to what is essentially his own death sentence—a futile last act of resistance. The play’s final lines are delivered by the Jew Simon, Mamlock’s loyal assistant, who asserts that the events of the past days and weeks will never be forgotten.

As compared to the edition of the play later published in East Germany, earlier versions that were the basis for translations for theaters from Tel Aviv to New York gave more space to the articulation of Jewish themes and included additional Jewish characters, who presented a broader spectrum of Jewish life and options available to Jews in Germany in the months before the transfer of power to the Nazis in 1933. Wolf biographer Henning Müller suggests that the excision of the discussion of Jewishness from the play was a result of political pressures as Wolf came under the scrutiny of Soviet authorities and exiled German communists in Moscow.⁴ The treatment of issues having to do with Jewish versus German identity—and above all the representation of anti-Semitism—was further elided in the 1938 Soviet screen adaptation.

The Soviet Film

Considered to be one of the first films to depict the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany, Adolf Minkin and Herbert Rappaport’s screen adaptation premiered on 5 September 1938.⁵ The film was widely shown in the Soviet Union, playing to over 370,000 spectators in a little more than a week. Over 300 copies of the Soviet *Professor Mamlok* were made for large-scale distribution, and the film played for about a year before being withdrawn in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression treaty of 23 August 1939. The film was not screened again in the Soviet Union until the war with Germany commenced.⁶ Released in the U.S.

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

only two months after its Soviet debut, the Rappaport/Minkin film was awaited with great anticipation in leftist circles, due in large degree to the attention that had been garnered a year earlier by the New York production of the play, which was the first anti-Nazi work produced by the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project. The Soviet screen adaptation would be one of the first films to depict the Nazi persecution of Jews for American audiences and the first Soviet import to be approved by the Production Code Administration, the US film industry's self-regulatory censorship body.⁷ Although the PCA seal gave the film access to mainstream cinemas in theory, in practice local censorship boards reacted allergically to films with communist sympathies, and *Professor Mamlok* was banned in Chicago and a number of other cities.⁸ After the war, the film was shown at Soviet cultural institutes in the Soviet Occupied Zone beginning in 1947 and was re-released in the GDR in 1964.

Reflecting a new propaganda effort on the part of the Soviet government to galvanize international opposition to Hitler, the Lenfilm adaptation was politicized in a number of respects and was released in the same year as two other anti-Nazi films based on works by exile German antifascists: *Semya Oppengeym* (*The Oppenheim Family*, dir. Grigori Roshal), adapted from the novel by Lion Feuchtwanger; and *Bolotnye soldaty* (*The Swamp Soldiers*, dir. Aleksandr Macharet), loosely based on Wolfgang Langhoff's memoir *Moorsoldaten*.⁹ In addition to recasting Mamlock as an antifascist martyr, who dies not by his own hand but under the fire of Nazi bullets, the 1938 film devotes far more attention than the play to the daring and illegal activities of Rolf and his group of antifascist resisters, which also provide for additional action and suspense. Indicative of this shift, the film begins not with the introduction of Mamlock and other principal characters in the hospital, but with a scene in which an athletic Rolf—an archetype of vital communist youth—performs gymnastics on the parallel bars. Mamlock appears not so much a humanist, as a scientist buoyed by the belief in progress, who presents his son with role models such as Louis Pasteur and the German scientists Rudolph Virchow and Robert Koch. Rolf replies that in the current situation microscopes are not enough and that there are other geniuses worth emulating, such as Marx and Lenin ... names that are not uttered in the play. In the film's narrative surrounding Rolf, we witness his tireless work distributing political pamphlets and a number of close calls as he narrowly escapes capture by the Nazis. He is eventually caught and then rescued in a dangerous prisoner transport caper. The role of his friend Ernst, a relatively minor character in the play, is similarly elevated in Rappaport and Minkin's film version, in which he is seized by the Nazis while covering Rolf's escape and is later tortured while under interrogation.

An additional major character change in the Soviet adaptation relates to the development of the figure of Inge over the course of the story. Not only is the relationship between Inge and Rolf more developed than in the play, her transformation is much more dramatic. When Hellpach arrives at the surgery, after being tipped off about Rolf's presence there, she tries to prevent the Nazi doctor from shooting him. In the ensuing struggle, Hellpach's gun goes off and he falls into a heap at her feet. Rolf and Inge then escape together to the rooftops, where they witness Mamlock's impassioned speech to a Nazi militia that has in the meantime surrounded his hospital.

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

Instead of the drama's remorse-tinged suicide—in the 1938 film, a glance at a picture of his communist son distracts him from committing the act long enough for a call to operate to intervene—Mamlock lives to proclaim his love for Germany, the land of great scientists, poets, and philosophers: “The Germany of extraordinary discoveries. The Germany of work and peace. But not your Germany, a barbaric land of torment, tears, and blood. A country of war and executioners.” After proclaiming that the Nazis will never succeed in suppressing the true Germany and that their machine guns will soon be taken away from them, the courageous doctor is gunned down in front of a stunned throng of people. The cry “Murderers!” rings from the crowd. A lingering close-up of Mamlock's illuminated profile shot at ground level concludes the sequence of Mamlock's heroic act of defiance. Yet the film does not close with this act of brave, yet ultimately futile resistance, but with a message brimming with hope. The film's final scene, which supplants the Jew Simon's appeal to memory in the play, takes place at an undisclosed time after the events of Mamlock's public slaying by the Nazis. Rolf and his antifascist resisters have regrouped, and the professor's son vows to avenge his father and destroy the fascist barbarians. When Rolf asserts that he is ready to die for the cause, an older comrade interjects that their role is not to die, but to live and to fight more passionately in communist brotherhood.

In the play, the character of Dr. Inge Ruoff and the scene in which Ruth Mamlock recounts how she has been run out of school by her classmates both point to everyday anti-Semitism and popular support for the Nazis among average citizens. The 1938 film, on the other hand, eliminates the character of Ruth altogether and engineers a radical change of heart for Inge. The Soviet adaptation thus paints a largely positive picture of ordinary Germans, who cry murder in the face of Nazi guns and help Rolf and Inge escape from their Nazi pursuers. The implication is that Nazi elites are responsible for bringing Germany to the brink of disaster, not the German population. A similar impetus to play down the anti-Semitism of characters not wearing Nazi uniforms is evident in a new scene added to the Rappaport/Minkin rendition, in which Hellpach confronts Mamlock with a petition allegedly signed by patients unwilling to be treated by a Jewish doctor. The patients, however, subsequently attest to the fact that the signatures are forgeries, proving the petition to be nothing more than an attempt by Hellpach to undermine the beloved doctor.

The East German Film

In a number of ways, Konrad Wolf's *Professor Mamlock* marks a return to the concerns of the play. This restorative impetus—one which also inserts an autobiographical level of meaning into the text—is signalled in the film's opening montage in which a portrait of the director's father is overlaid with the playwright's signature. This gesture to the origins of the Mamlock story is followed by a scrolling text that underscores the film's complex relationship of proximity and distance to the drama, as well as the historical context in which it was written: “Friedrich Wolf wrote a play in 1933. Back then the death camps had yet to be built, the gas chambers had yet to be invented, six millions Jews had not yet been murdered, the Second World War was still in a distant future. None of this had happened yet. The author tells of the fate of the German doctor, the Jew, Professor Mamlock.” Symptomatic of the film's multilayered mode of engaging the

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

audience, in the following sequence Mamlock addresses the camera directly in a close-up:

You are full of fear. Will a new war follow the last genocide? You are afraid for your son, your daughter, your husband. Have we built our hopes and plans on a foundation of sand? Is there still a place in a deafening, forward-storming world for democracy and freedom, *Geist*, and harmony? You don't want to admit that you wake up in the night and stare into the darkness. Who among us has not felt this? But that is no reason for desperation.

As Mamlock finishes his oration, Beethoven's triumphant 9th Symphony sets in and the camera expands the field of view to reveal that his words have been addressed to a gathering of family and friends at his home on the occasion of New Year's Eve, 1932. Nothing in Mamlock's speech links it to the time of the film's narrative, allowing spectators to associate his description of an uncertain world to their Cold War present before it is subsequently contextualized by the *mise-en-scène*. By establishing intertextual relationships between the film and the drama—a genealogy that the 1938 Soviet film disavows altogether—and by sensitizing spectators to links between the past and present, Konrad Wolf's film thus allows for plural perspectives on the Mamlock story.¹⁰

It has been argued that DEFA's *Mamlock* adaptation—like many communist-era films—remains encumbered by a communist doctrine that ultimately requires that Jewish identity be subordinated to class identity and political necessities.¹¹ Mamlock's suicide, in this reading, corroborates a popular form of anti-Semitism that in essence blames the Jews for their own persecution. Yet the film's self-positioning in relation to the drama sheds a somewhat different light on the articulation of Jewish identity. For the homage to the text of the father is engendered by the restoration of key Jewish characters. Simon returns to the narrative to thematize the irrationalism of the rhetoric of blood and race. Mamlock's daughter, Ruth, reassumes her role as a victim of the terror visited upon Jews by ordinary Germans; significantly, Ruth's desperate flight from her school is heightened in the film by a striking point-of-view montage that temporarily puts the audience in the position of the victim. There is also a new nuance in the depiction of Rolf in relation to his identity as a Jew. While his role in the DEFA film as the committed antifascist who clashes with his conservative father is enhanced as compared to the play, and a few elements from the resistance narrative of the Rappaport/Minkin film are echoed in the DEFA version, Rolf also utters words not to be found in either text when he identifies himself as a Jew in a dialogue with Inge.

But perhaps the DEFA film's greatest departure from both the play and the 1938 film is not a matter of dialogue or character, but the way in which the camera is used to stage a drama of identity. In the scene depicting the suicide, Mamlock is left alone to consider whether to sign the protocol documenting his allegedly seditious statements. With a loud ticking in the background, shots of an illuminated sign marking the entrance to the operating room—"Eintritt verboten" (Entry Forbidden)—alternate in rapid succession with extreme close-ups of Mamlock's face. Before he shoots himself, a voice-over delivers the lines from the play, in which the doctor decries the colleagues and friends who have betrayed him: "A misunderstanding, a complete misunderstanding." For Mamlock, the assimilated Jew and veteran of German wars, this is the

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

moment in which the truth of his otherness is fully revealed to him. His lived conviction that reason, humanism, and shared bourgeois values and culture would provide entry into German society have proven to be a fatal miscalculation. The final scene is thus not framed as a question of his failure to commit to political action—although the film’s indictment of political passivity lingers in the background—but rather of his underestimation of a deep-rooted popular anti-Semitism. This emphasis emerges not only in the scene of his betrayal in the hospital, but also in a seemingly minor, but moving sequence—again taken from a similar scene in the play and omitted in the Soviet adaptation—in which even Mamlock’s loyal, non-Jewish wife is shown to harbor stereotypes regarding the cerebral nature of the Jewish people.

The notion of the irreconcilability of political commitment and Jewish identity that is typical of Eastern European films about the Holocaust remains implicit in Konrad Wolf’s film, and there can be no doubt about its investment in the founding narrative of antifascism as the basis of East German national identity. The latter is evident in the staging of Mamlock’s last words, which—although nearly identical to the monologue in the play—are endowed with new meaning in the postwar context, which the film acknowledges in the exposition. In the play, when Mamlock asks Inge to give his best to Rolf when they meet on that “different path,” the reference can only be to the path of resistance, which his son has chosen to follow and he had refused to recognize as necessary. In the geopolitical context of the postwar period, on the other hand, this different path leads further into the future, namely to the GDR as the heir to antifascist forces in German history.

Simultaneous levels of meaning also imbue the film’s final axiom: “There is no greater crime than not wanting to fight, when fight one must.” Scrolling up the screen against the background of a close-up of Mamlock’s lifeless profile, the text endorses the primary message of the prewar play, while inviting spectators to draw conclusions for a fraught Cold War present. In this context, these conclusions are not limited to issues of postwar geopolitics and the identity of the GDR, but also encompass the memory of victims and the role of everyday Germans in enabling the Holocaust. Mobilizing the fundamentally intertextual nature of the remake, Konrad Wolf’s film complicates the GDR’s founding antifascist narrative—in particular by re-inserting a broader range of German Jewish identities—without abandoning the dream of “a different path” in German history.

*Stefan Soldovieri is an Associate Professor of German at the University of Toronto. His current research focuses on GDR cinema, remakes in German contexts, and inter-German film relations and genre cinema during the early postwar period. His book, *Managing the Movies* (forthcoming from The University of Toronto Press), explores the East German film crisis of 1965, in which nearly an entire year’s film production was withdrawn. Recent articles include: “Sozialistische Sichtweisen. DDR-Kinoarchitektur vom repräsentativen Nationalismus zur internationalen Moderne” in *DEFA International: Grenzüberschreitende Filmbeziehungen vor und nach dem Mauerbau* (Springer, 2013); “Not Only Entertainment: Sights and Sounds of the DEFA Music Film” in *DEFA at the Crossroads of East German and International Film Culture* (DeGruyter, 2014); “Edgar Wallace Goes East: Locations of Genre and German Identities in Joachim Hasler’s *Fog* (Nebel, GDR 1962)” in *The Meaning of Culture* (Wehrhahn, 2009).*

The Careers of Professor Mamlock: From Exile Drama, to Soviet Adaptation, to Postwar Remake

Works cited and further reading

Coulson, Anthony S. "Paths of Discovery: The Films of Konrad Wolf." *DEFA. East German Cinema, 1946-1992*, eds. Sean Allan & John Sandford. New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 1999. 164-182.

Doherty, Thomas. *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Elsaesser, Thomas and Michael Wedel. "Defining DEFA's Historical Imaginary: The Films of Konrad Wolf." *New German Critique* 82 (2001): 3-24.

Hicks, Jeremy. *First Films of the Holocaust. Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

Insdorf, Annette. *Indelible Shadows. Film and the Holocaust*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Koch, Gertrud. "Of the Disappearance of the Dead among the Living: The Holocaust and the Confusion of Identities in the Films of Konrad Wolf." *New German Critique* 60 (1993): 57-75.

Müller, Henning. *Friedrich Wolf, 1888-1953: deutscher Jude, Schriftsteller, Sozialist*. Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2009.

Müller, Henning. "'Ist es weil ich Jude bin?' Jüdische Traditionslinien bei Friedrich Wolf." <http://www.friedrichwolf.de/index.php?aid=26>.

Silberman, Marc. "The Authenticity of Autobiography." *German Cinema, Texts in Context*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995, 145-161.

Wolf, Friedrich. *Professor Mamlock*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1952.

1 Wolf's style is among the most studied among DEFA's directors. See Coulson, Elsaesser/Wedel, Koch, Pinkert, and Silberman.

2 Coulson 172-173, et al.

3 See Müller's comprehensive 2009 biography.

4 Henning Müller, "'Ist es weil ich Jude bin?' Jüdische Traditionslinien bei Friedrich Wolf." <http://www.friedrichwolf.de/index.php?aid=26>.

5 Insdorf 155.

6 See Hicks's detailed account of the film's release and reception, 28-41.

7 Doherty 195.

8 Ibid. See also Insdorf 155 and Hicks 36-37.

9 Hicks 21.

10 See Coulson for a complementary reading of this scene 168.

11 Koch 69. Insdorf 164.