The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

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The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

One US Premiere… or Two?

By Hiltrud Schulz

"New German Star!" blared the headline for a *LIFE* magazine photo-series about the 21-year-old German actress Hildegard Knef, published on May 19, 1947. Knef was celebrated by German audiences for her role in Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers Are among Us* (1946), backed by the Soviet film office. A year later, she appeared in the internationally successful rubble film that was the first postwar production in the American zone, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (1947, dir. Harald Braun). Nevertheless, *LIFE* noted, "Miss Knef, while pleased to be so much sought after by the rival occupying forces, would like even better to be in Hollywood."[1]

Only a few months after publication of the *LIFE* article, Knef's dream came true. She signed a contract with American producer David O. Selznick and arrived in Hollywood in April 1948. In charge of this move was Elli Silman, Knef's first agent. Silman, a Jewish-German, left Germany when the Nazis came to power in 1933. A former secretary at the German UFA Studio, in the U.S. Silman first worked for a literary agency, before opening her own agency for writers and actors in Hollywood in the mid-1940s. After WWII, she returned to Germany as US film officer and worked with producer Erich Pommer, director Billy Wilder and actor Peter van Eyck, among other people, on rebuilding the film industry in the American occupation zone.[2] Silman, who was well connected in the transatlantic German-American film industry through her time at the UFA Studio and in Hollywood, was eager to find new talent for the American market and signed Hildegard Knef, the young postwar German star.[3]

The film that had made Hildegard Knef known outside Germany, *The Murderers Are among Us*, was shown in European cities, including Berlin, London, Paris and Venice, and premiered in the U.S. in Los Angeles. There it screened as a Sunday matinée at the Academy Theater at the end of 1946 or beginning of 1947. Apparently 1400 members of the "Hollywood elite"[4]—including *Los Angeles Times* columnist Hedda Hopper and director Gustav Machatý—came to the single screening hosted by Austrian-born American filmmaker Billy Wilder. According to Erich Jäger[5]—the Hollywood correspondent for the newly-founded German magazine *Neue Filmwelt*—Wilder did not read the available English titles. Instead, he gave his own "explanations and commentaries that were at times too amusing or too critical. […] In short opening comments, he stated that *The Murderers Are among Us* is not comparable with masterpieces like *Der letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*) and *Der blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*), but nevertheless…."[6] The Hollywood audience celebrated the film with thunderous, genuine applause lasting several minutes. After the screening, Jäger interviewed viewers, who shared their first impressions: "Hildegard Knef is excellent!" "The German camera can't be beaten!" "Best scene: the Christmas party in the bombed out church during a snowfall." In a discussion that followed immediately after the screening, a Hollywood representative who used to work in Berlin before Erich Pommer arrived there remembered: "The film was offered to us, but we rejected it. We thought it is too boring."[7] Jäger called upon German filmmakers, especially in Berlin and at DEFA, to send more of this kind of films to Hollywood, so that "Hollywood would bear the message to willingly and equally accept German film into the peace-loving community of filmmakers the world over."[8]

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1 "New German Star." *LIFE,* May 19, 1947. 129-135. The article includes a short introduction and seven pictures with captions interspersed with advertising.

2 Erich Pommer, Billy Wilder and Peter van Eyck were part of the group of German-Austrian film artists who had left Europe during the Nazi years. They returned to Germany as members of the US army and became responsible for setting up the film industry in the American occupation zone of Germany.

3 Zoller, Lisa-Marie. "Elli Silman: Film producer and agent between Hollywood and Germany." www.transatlanticperspectives.org. Accessed August 15, 2016.

4 Jäger, Erich. "Hollywoods 1400 Filmgrössen applaudieren!" *Neue Filmwelt*, 2/1947. 24.

5 The *Neue Filmwelt* article (issue 2/47) was published under the name Erich Jäger; but the same issue also includes an article attributed to Ernst Jäger in Hollywood. One can assume that both articles were written by the same person. Ernst Jäger was an influential German film journalist during the Weimar Republic and worked as the editor-in-chief for *Film-Kurier.* Because his wife was Jewish, he was banned from his profession by the Nazis. In the late 1930s, while on a promotion tour for Leni Riefenstahl in the U.S., he decided to stay. He supported himself by writing articles about Hollywood for various film magazines, including the monthly *Neue Filmwelt,* which appeared from 1947 to 1953.

6 Jäger, *Neue Filmwelt* 2/47. 24.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

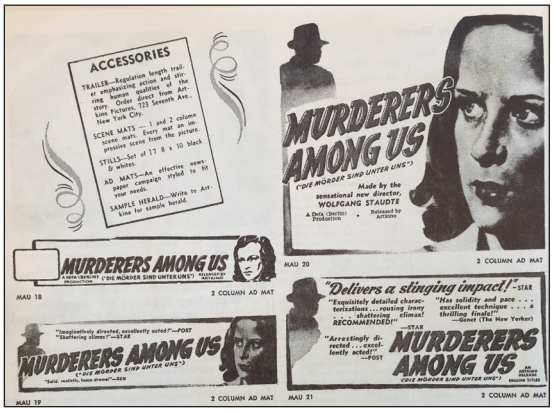
The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948 • *The Murderers Are among Us* • A 2016 DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

Based on the available information, it is not possible to reconstruct how this special Los Angeles premiere came about. So soon after it was released in Germany, one can only surmise that well-placed people were interested in a Hollywood screening. It seems some of the interest was centered on actress Hildegard Knef. Talent agent Elli Silman, for example, wanted to promote Knef in Hollywood, in order to land a contract for her with David O. Selznick. After successfully launching German actress Marlene Dietrich in 1930, Erich Pommer—the US Film Production Control Officer in the American zone, and a close friend of Hildegard Knef and her future husband, Kurt Hirsch[9]—planned to bring another German star to Hollywood. As he said, in reference to Knef: "And I am now grooming another girl Hollywood is going to want to grab."[10] In Germany, meanwhile, Alfred Lindemann, a co-founder and shareholder in the newly-founded DEFA Studio, was also interested in an American screening. Trying to secure direct revenue for the DEFA Studio, Lindemann worked on an American distribution agreement for this first DEFA film: "Bypassing Sovexport, he contacted an American film representative, apparently hoping for more favorable results through direct negotiation."[11] Although Knef's career did not take off at this point, when *The Murderers Are among Us* was released in the U.S. in 1948, four months after Knef's arrival in Hollywood, the American press celebrated "The Sensational New Hollywood Discovery, Hildegard Knef."[12]

"The psychological drama"[13] *Murderers Among Us*[14] had its second American premiere at the Avenue Playhouse in New York on August 16, 1948. The film was distributed with English titles by New York-based Artkino Pictures, the exclusive distributor of Soviet films in North and South America from 1940 until the mid-1950s.[15] Artkino was closely linked to Sovexportfilm, the international export operation for films produced in the Soviet Union. After the DEFA Studios was founded in Germany's Soviet occupation zone in May 1946, Sovexportfilm took on the international distribution of their films as well,[16] adding DEFA titles to their export catalog. In this way, Artkino automatically became the exclusive representative of DEFA films in North and South America and remained so until Sovexport transferred its international distribution rights to the DEFA Auslandsabteilung (Department for World Trade) in 1950.[17]

Before the New York premiere, Artkino set up an extensive marketing campaign for the promotion of this first German postwar film. Marketing materials included: a trailer produced by Artkino, "emphasizing action and the stirring human qualities of the story;"[18] scene mats with "impressive scenes from the picture;"[19] and two-column ad mats in various formats for "an effective newspaper campaign."[20]



Artkino provided four different sized ad mats for marketing purposes. Daily papers completed these mats with the latest screening date information.
© Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

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9 Kurt Hirsch came to Berlin as a US film officer and married Hildegard Knef on December 15, 1947. Erich Pommer was their bestman.

10 Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945-1948*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: Univ. of California Press, 1998. 149.

11 Ibid. 134.

12 Marketing material, 1948. Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

13 Press release, 1948. Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

14 This was the U.S. distribution title.

15 Artkino was the successor of Amkino, which was founded in 1926 and held a monopoly on Soviet film distribution in North America until it closed in 1940. Nicholas (Nicola) Napoli, who had joined Amkino as assistant to the president, set up Artkino and was the company's president until his death in 1962. See also: Krukones, James H. "The Unspooling of Artkino: Soviet Film Distribution in America, 1940-1975." *History*. 2009. Paper 26. collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/26. Accessed August 15, 2016.

16 Sovexportfilm was the rightsholder of films produced in the Soviet Occupation Zone until 1950.

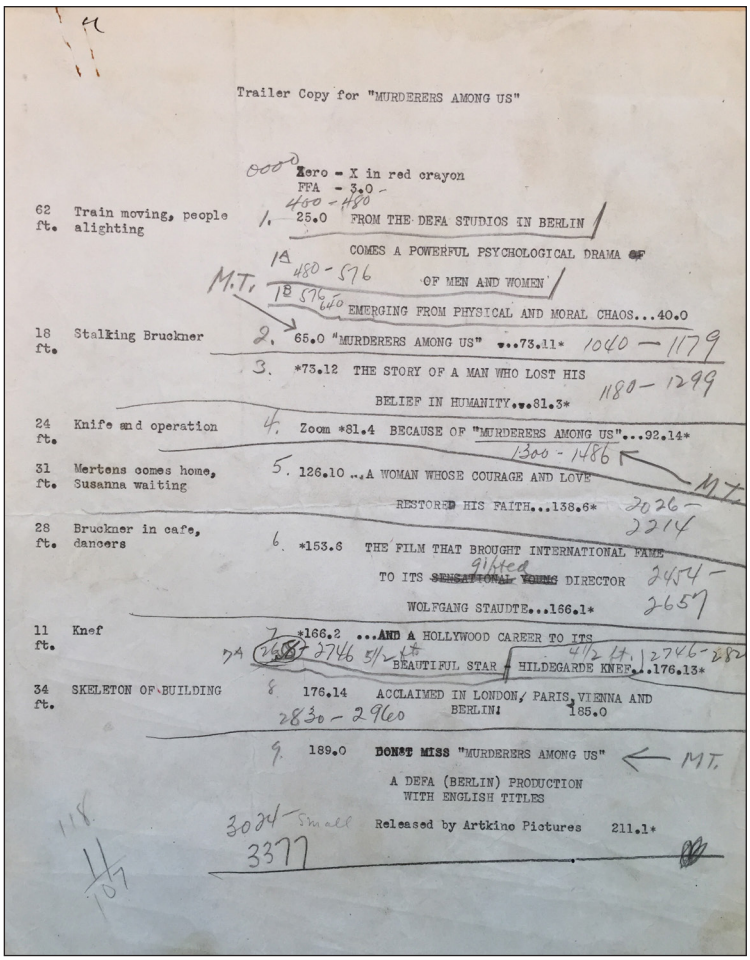
17 From 1948 to 1950, Artkino Pictures distributed nine feature films produced by DEFA, including: *Ehe im Schatten* (*Marriage in the Shadows*); *Irgendwo in Berlin* (*Somewhere in Berlin*); *Affäre Blum* (*The Blum Affair*); and *Razzia* (*Police Raid*). See: Schiller, Konstanze. "East German Films in the USA: Film Distribution Contracts 1945-1990." Paper presented at the 2014 German Studies Association conference.

18 Marketing materials, 1948. Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948



Trailer Copy for "MURDERERS AMONG US"

Zero - X in red crayon
FFA - 3.0 -

62 ft. Train moving, people alighting

1. 25.0 FROM THE DEFA STUDIOS IN BERLIN

COMES A POWERFUL PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA OF

OF MEN AND WOMEN

EMERGING FROM PHYSICAL AND MORAL CHAOS...40.0

18 ft. Stalking Bruckner

2. 65.0 "MURDERERS AMONG US" ...73.11*

3. *73.12 THE STORY OF A MAN WHO LOST HIS

BELIEF IN HUMANITY...81.3*

24 ft. Knife and operation

4. Zoom *81.4 BECAUSE OF "MURDERERS AMONG US"...92.14*

31 ft. Mertens comes home, Susanna waiting

5. 126.10 ...A WOMAN WHOSE COURAGE AND LOVE

RESTORED HIS FAITH...138.6*

28 ft. Bruckner in cafe, dancers

6. *153.6 THE FILM THAT BROUGHT INTERNATIONAL FAME

TO ITS ~~SENSATIONAL~~ ~~YOUNG~~ DIRECTOR

WOLFGANG STAUDTE...156.1*

11 ft. Knef

7. *166.2 ...AND A HOLLYWOOD CAREER TO ITS

BEAUTIFUL STAR - HILDEGARDE KNEF...176.13*

34 ft. SKELETON OF BUILDING

8. 176.14 ACCLAIMED IN LONDON, PARIS, VIENNA AND BERLIN! 185.0

9. 189.0 DON'T MISS "MURDERERS AMONG US"

A DEFA (BERLIN) PRODUCTION
WITH ENGLISH TITLES

Released by Artkino Pictures 211.1*

Editing list for the film trailer.
© Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

Artkino also suggested several tag lines to their media partners, focusing on the postwar situation in Berlin, the lead actress Hildegard Knef, the director Wolfgang Staudte and the European success of the film:

-The picture that marks the birth of postwar German film industry!
-By the sensational new director Wolfgang Staudte!
-A sensational box office hit in every capital of Europe!
-The film that won a Hollywood career for its lovely star, Hildegard Knef!
-A human story of love and guilt in the chaos of postwar Berlin!
-A psychological drama of life in Germany today!
-Tumultuous human emotions in the shadow of Berlin's ruins![21]

One week before the film's official release date, Artkino placed ads in newspapers belonging to the American Foreign Language Press group, including in the German-Jewish émigré journal *Aufbau, The German-American, Greek-American Tribune* and *Ukrainian Daily News*. During the four-week run of the film in New York, advertisements continued to appear in many daily papers, including the *Herald Tribune, The New York Times, New York Star, Daily Worker* and *New York Post*.

Artkino also invited reviewers to three press screenings, held on August 5, 10 and 12, 1948. Prestigious daily and trade papers accepted the invitation, including *LIFE, The New York Times, Variety, New York Post, New Republic, Newsweek, Harper's Bazaar*, many American foreign language presses, and *Foreign Film News*, the newsletter of the New York-based

[21] Ibid. Artkino marketing materials included a list of nine tag lines.

Foreign Films Movie Club. Interest in the film was apparently overwhelming and thirty-one well-known journalists and film enthusiasts attended the August 10 press screening.[22] The list of attendees reflected the colorful and captivating media and film scene in New York in the late 1940s. Of particular interest were: respected movie reviewer Irene Thirer who joined *The New York Post* in 1935 and stayed there for almost 30 years; Amos Vogel, the founder of New York's avant-garde ciné-club Cinema 16, the most successful and influential membership film society in North America; and Parker Tyler, author, poet, film critic and film commentator at Cinema 16. Gerhart Eisler, brother of composer Hanns Eisler and co-founder of the anti-Nazi newspaper *The German-American*, as well as Gerhart Seger—a German social-democratic politician and Reichstag deputy who was arrested by the Nazis and escaped to the USA, where he worked as an editor for *Neue Volkszeitung*—also joined the press screening.[23]

In the weeks following the press screenings, film reviews came out in numerous papers serving different readerships. The film was widely covered by papers ranging from the *Daily Worker*, published by the American Communist Party, to the conservative papers *The Sun* and *The New York Times*, and from the trade papers *Variety, Motion Picture Daily* and *Hollywood Reporter*, to the weekly magazine *The New Yorker*. Although the reviews reflected the widely diverging stances taken by these papers, as well as various American positions on Germany, in general they acknowledged the high quality of filmmaking exhibited in *The Murderers Are among Us*. The film critic from *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, emphasized that Staudte's movie was "an indication that the German film industry is making a revival,"[24] and *The Motion Picture Daily* commented that "This film has excellent prospects of taking its place among the best of German pictures."[25] Listings and reviews also acknowledged that this rebirth of German film was taking place in the Soviet occupation zone, with *Variety* remarking that, despite this, "the film is not weighted with heavy-handed propaganda."[26]

Many reviewers were concerned about the film's narrative and aired different opinions about its treatment of the individual and collective guilt of Germans. Several felt that the film made an honest attempt to deal with Nazi war crimes. Among these, the *Daily Worker* acknowledged that the "film [is] well worth seeing […], because it is an attempt on the part of the Germans to deal with the subject of war guilt."[27] In a similar vein, the *Herald Tribune* approached the film in the context of the Nuremberg Trials and declared the film "is a defense of the war trials, which turned in more than one Nazi butcher."[28] And the *Motion Picture Daily* wrote that the film "sensitively treats the horrible dilemma of the German anti-Nazi [Dr. Mertens] who fought in the Wehrmacht and whose conscience is awake to the realization that he too is guilty."[29] *The New York Star* went even further, noting that the film intended to address Germans and, although "German-made, it offers them no 'escapist entertainment,' but [sentences] them to unceasing expiation, confronts them with a bitter and remorseless dramatization of their own war guilt…."[30]

Others felt this attempt was unsuccessful, however. Though Robert Hatch from *The New Republic*, for example, described the film as "a German investigation into the subject of guilt—an investigation in which, as far as you can see, the Russians made no attempt to participate," he concludes that "the result is so wide of the mark as to be frightening."[31] The *Daily Worker* was disappointed that the "film's protagonist is not consciously treated, and yet it is his moral guilt and the moral guilt of others who went along with fascism that seems to cry out for investigation."[32] And, while Janet Flanner—aka Genêt, the Paris correspondent for *The New Yorker*—acknowledged that the film "raises the question that everybody wishes the Germans would answer: Do they think they are culpable?," she was frustrated that the film did not answer the question "Who are the real murderers?"[33]

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[22] Participant list, press conference, August 10, 1948. Artkino Corporation Collection, Art. 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.
[23] Ibid.
[24] "*Murderers* Shows Revival In Germany." *Hollywood Reporter*, February 3, 1949.
[25] *Motion Picture Daily*, September 1, 1948.
[26] *Variety,* August 25, 1948.
[27] Tank, Herb. "*Murderers* an Important Film." *Daily Worker*, August 17, 1948.
[28] Barnes, Howard. "On the Screen." *Herald Tribune*, August 17, 1948.
[29] *Motion Picture Daily*, September 1, 1948.
[30] Ager, Cecelia. "The Germans Face Their Own Guilt." *New York Star*, August 17, 1948.
[31] Hatsch, Robert. "Movies: The Good German." *The New Republic*, August 17, 1948.
[32] Tank, *Daily Worker*
[33] Genêt, *The New Yorker,* July 17, 1948.

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The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

In the midst of their preoccupation with individual and collective guilt in the film, no journalist brought up the fact that some of the artists in the film had worked on films under the Nazis. Instead of linking the film to Nazi cinema, they focused on it as "a return to the mastery of cinematic techniques which brought forth the great German movies of the 1920's,"[34] commenting that the film "displays the excellent German film technique that was developed before there was any Hitler."[35] Except for *The New York Times* reviewer, who was more critical of the film, including its pace and length, critics praised the film's artistic merits:

- "The technical credits are admirable considering the difficulties that must have characterized the production. The score and photography are splendid."[36] (*Hollywood Reporter*)
- "the picture is an extraordinarily moving document, remarkably well acted"[37](*Cue Magazine*)
- "Hildegard Knef, Ernst Borchert and all others give top-notch performances. Direction and dialog by Wolfgang Staudte is beyond reproach."[38] (*Motion Picture Daily*)
- "It is solid, realistic drama, told tensely, acted with feeling by Ernst Borchert, Arno Paulsen, and a striking young beauty, Hildegard Knef."[39] (*The Sun*)

A report on the second premiere was written by one "Kingsley" and presented to the directors of the DEFA Studio back in the Soviet occupied zone of Germany. It expresses the opinion that promotional efforts were insufficient and the film was far from a success. It claims the theater was "almost empty" the first evening and that—except for in PM, Star, *the* Post *and* Daily Worker*—the reviews were negative. Furthermore, it argues, the film "could have easily been cut by 20 minutes, without losing any substance. With good publicity and preparation it could have been a box office hit, instead of a flop."*[40] *Though it is not clear, the informant for this report may have been Edward Kingsley, who later founded Kingsley International Pictures, the US distributor for British and French films, including the 1957 DEFA-French co-production* Die Hexen von Salem *(*The Witches of Salem*), based on Arthur Miller's* The Crucible.

Interesting side note.

The story of how *The Murderers Are among Us* came to the United States in the late 1940s presents us with several unique elements. First of all, there was the oddity of having two premieres, one in Los Angeles and one in New York. Second, there was the ambiguous role played by the career aspirations of one of its stars—which, by the time the New York reviews were being written, seem to have faded more and more into the background. Finally, these screenings represented a unique event in the history of films produced at the DEFA Studios: never again would a DEFA film receive so much attention, let alone be considered to have made "an important contribution to our [American] knowledge of the moral, ethical, and artistic preoccupations of Germany…."[41] What is clear is that the US screenings of *The Murderers Are among Us* brought together a transatlantic mix of people that was also unique to the period: journalists and artists who had emigrated to the U.S. and, in some cases, returned to Europe; American leftwing intellectuals who supported the anti-Nazi

[34] "The Screen: Murder Murder Everywhere." *The Commonweal*, August 27, 1948.
[35] Genêt, *The New Yorker,* July 17, 1948.
[36] "Murderers Shows Revival In Germany." Hollywood Reporter, February 3, 1949.
[37] N.B.. "Murderers Among Us." *Cue*, August 21, 1948.
[38] *Motion Picture Daily*, September 1, 1948.
[39] Creelman, Eileen. "The New Movie: Drama from Modern Germany." *The Sun*, August 17, 1948.
[40] BArch DR 117/21855 Barbara Barlet, DEFA-Stiftung, shared a document dated August 31, 1948. The short report—based on first-hand information provided by "our correspondent in New York" Kingsley—was signed by Karl Hans Bergmann, shareholder and co-manager of the DEFA Studio. In another short report (BArch 117/21855) dated September 15, 1948, Karl Hans Bergmann informed that the film was apparently taken off the New York cinema circuit after two weeks, because the film was not re-edited and adapted for an American market.
[41] Ager, Cecelia. "The Germans Face Their Own Guilt." *New York Star*, August 17, 1948.
[42] *The Murderers Are among Us* was distributed by Audio Brandon Films and International Film Exchange (later renamed CIFEX). The film was also part of the 1975 DEFA film week at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

cause; and influential film personalities, be they interested in a German postwar film industry or the promotion of art house cinema. After the founding of East Germany in 1949, the Trading with the Enemy Act was reinvigorated in the U.S. and no longer allowed for the import of DEFA films. Despite this, *The Murderers Are among Us* remained in distribution in the U.S.[42] throughout the Cold War years.

I would like to thank Ashley Swinnerton, of the Celeste Bartos International Film Study Center at The Museum of Modern Art, for her help during my research visit. Thanks also to Barbara Barlet of the DEFA Foundation in Berlin.

Hiltrud Schulz has been promoting DEFA films for almost 30 years, and has been directly responsible for international licensing of film rights and presenting films at international film markets, festivals and retrospectives. Since 2002, she has worked as the Production and Outreach Manager at the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

American Reviews[1]

***The New Republic*, 16 August 1948 —"Movies: The Good German," by Robert Hatch**

"[…] It is a German investigation into the subject of guilt—an investigation in which, as far as you can see, the Russians made no attempt to participate—and the result is so wide of the mark as to be frightening. The important word of the title is "among." If it had been called 'The Murderer Within Us' the implication, and the picture, would have been quite different. It might then at least have looked at the problem instead of evading it. What this film does is to equate the moral problem of Germany with bringing the overt criminal to book. […] The moral issue, on a larger scale, is not that some Germans were sadistic murderers but that no Germans put a curb to that bestiality. Karl Jaspers of Heidelberg has said "the proof of our guilt is that we are alive," but the Germans at large still seek a scapegoat. […] The film has been shown throughout the four zones of Germany, presumably on the theory that German audiences should be told that it is wrong to massacre civilians and that men who did such things must be made to admit their error. This implied acceptance of the film's moral is the most alarming fact of all. […]

***The New Yorker*, 17 July 1948 — by Genêt (aka Janet Flanner)**

"The first German film made since the war, and already presented at the 1947 film festival in Venice, is now being shown in Paris. It is called 'Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns' (The Murderers Are Among Us). It raises the question that everybody wishes the Germans would answer: Do they think they are culpable? […] The finale, nevertheless, is thrilling. It is a series of dissolving views of the cowardly, terror-stricken captain's face as he shouts, now here, now anywhere in Berlin, and for the world to hear, "*Ich bin nicht schuldig* (I am not guilty)!" The picture has solidity and pace. It displays the excellent German film technique that was developed before there was any Hitler. Unfortunately, it fails to answer the question that he and his Nazis raised: Who are the real murderers?"

***The New York Star*, 17 August 1948 — "The Germans Face Their Own Guilt," by Cecelia Ager**

"*Murderers Among Us*, the new German film drama at the Avenue, was made in Berlin primarily for distribution in Germany. It has been shown there in all four occupation zones. Its choice of theme, therefore, has a special significance: this is a movie available to the Germans, if they can bear to face it. German-made, it offers them no "escapist entertainment," but sentencing them to unceasing expiation, confronts them with a bitter and remorseless dramatization of their own war guilt, instead.

For American audiences interested in national manifestations of the movie medium as well as in expressions of contemporary German thinking about the War, *Murderers Among Us* indicates that the German cinema is feeling its way back to its former distinction. Here are evidences of the characterizations in depth; of the exquisitely detailed, precise character acting; of the well-calculated use of the camera and lighting to heighten dramatic effect; of the slow, thorough beginnings, the measured, inexorable acceleration, the suddenly pouncing, shattering climax—that the German cinema had made its own distinguishing marks.

These are some of its positive attributes; it has more. But *Murderers Among Us* has its negative aspects too: the ponderous brooding mood never relieved; a few cock-eyed camera angles signifying nothing except a reluctance to recognize dated artiness; the hammered-away-at sentimentality that evokes finally restless antagonism in place of the compassionate understanding it begs for.

Yet far outweighing its failures is its great sincerity, its unquestionable realism as far as it goes, and its occasional flashes of rousing irony. Its story observes some "good" and "bad" Germans striving to resume the patterns of their prewar lives and discover again their former personalities, in the immediate chaotic aftermath of the war. […] The movie

[1] All these clippings and more are included in the Artkino files # 213/214/215. New York: MoMA Film Studies Center.

as a whole delivers a stinging impact, while making an important contribution to our knowledge of the moral, ethical, and artistic preoccupations of Germany today."

***The Sun*, 17 August 1948 — "The New Movie: Drama from Modern Germany," by Eileen Creelman**

"The Avenue Playhouse presents a somber picture of modern Germany, made in post-war Berlin by people not afraid to face facts. There can be no running away from certain facts about that wrecked city. Its physical aspect, the crumbling buildings, the despairing look in German faces, the cheerful rats that seem better housed and fed than the humans, these are all parts of 'Murderers Among Us' (Die Moerder Sind Unter Uns). So also is a frank acceptance and resentment of the guilt of such people as one Capt. Bruckner […] 'Murderers Among Us' is not light entertainment nor cheerful entertainment. It is solid, realistic drama, told tensely, acted with feeling by Ernst Borchert, Arno Paulsen, and a striking young beauty, Hildegard Knef."

***Daily Worker*, 17 August 1948 — "'Murderers' an Important Film," by Herb Tank**

"*Murderers Among us* at the Avenue Playhouse is a post war German film well worth seeing for a number of reasons. First of all because it is an attempt on the part of the Germans to deal with the subject of war guilt. Aside from its theme the film is technically very interesting. Its narrative style, its photography and film editing, are examples of German film art that practically disappeared with the rise of fascism in Germany. In fact, *Murderers Among Us* indicates a keener grasp of its film technique than of its theme.

In dealing with the subject of war guilt this postwar melodrama makes a tactical compromise. It presents a difficult theme and at the same time attempts to make it palatable to a German audience. Its hero and its villain both fought with the Nazis. A flashback reveals the criminal murder of civilians, women and children, that prompts the film's action. It was the villain, a Nazi factory owner, who ordered the crime. But it was the film's hero, an army doctor, who carried it out after ineffectual protest. It is this crime that the hero seeks to avenge when he discovers the Nazi, the murderer among us, still alive and prospering in Berlin.

The criminal who ordered the deed is brought to justice. The guilt of the film's protagonist is not consciously treated, and yet it is his moral guilt and the moral guilt of others who went along with fascism that seems to cry out for investigation in *Murderers Among Us*. […]

Much of the film's visual excitement is created by the vigorous editing, the meaningful juxtaposition of shots. Like many of the old German films, and the early Russian films, *Murderers Among Us* seeks to speak most eloquently through the assembling of its strips of film."

***New York News*, 17 August 1948 — "Grim German Drama At Avenue Playhouse," by Wanda Hale**

"The chaff is separated from the wheat—the Nazi from the peace-loving Germans—in *Murderers Are Among Us*, the postwar German film on view at the Avenue Playhouse. Bombed Berlin, Russian Zone, is the grim setting for this drama of mingled elements, retribution, disillusionment and determination of a betrayed people to better the worst possible conditions. […]

***Herald Tribune*, 17 August 1948 — "On The Screen," by Howard Barnes**

"The post-war German film at the Avenue Playhouse, 'Murderers Among Us,' is full of indignation and scant filmic sense. Made in the Soviet-occupied zone, it takes an unconscionable time arriving at a Nazi mass murder of civilians, reminiscent of the Lidice slaughter. […] Essentially, 'Murderers Among Us' is a defense of the war trials which turned in more than one Nazi butcher."

***The New York Times*, 17 August 1948 — "THE SCREEN: Film From Germany," by T.M.P.**

"A confused and rambling study of disillusionment in post-war Germany is presented in heavily stylized fashion in

The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

'Murderers Among Us' This German-made picture, produced in 1946 at the DEFA studio in the Russian-controlled section of Berlin, had its local première yesterday at the Avenue Playhouse. […] The ruins of Berlin, its ragged, hungry and sick citizens, are employed for symbolic effect, but for the better part of thirty minutes the film is confusing and neither the German dialogue nor the English titles help to make the course of the story clear. Too much stress is placed upon the regeneration of the physician by means of a conventional romance. As a result the doctor's encounter with his former captain, a murderous Nazi who has managed to become comfortably established again as a "good" German, has the appearance of having been contrived for propagandistic rather than dramatic effect. […] The heroine, Hildegard Knef, is an attractive blonde and already is in Hollywood under contract to David O. Selznick. She handles herself competently, but gives no hint of especial acting ability in this particular role. However, it is only fair, considering the circumstances, to reserve judgment until Miss Knef may be seen under more favorable conditions."

***Cue*, 21 August 1948 — "Murderers Among Us," by N.B.**

"It is a sad but understandable fact that the best pictures about any war are usually made by the losing side. 'Murderers Among Us,' filmed by Germans in the Russian zone of Berlin, is a savage picture of Berlin in 1945, where people are trying to rebuild their lives among the ruins. Its realism and impact are heightened by the obvious fact that the producers know only too well what they are talking about. […] The film ends on a fine note of bitterness, as the cornered murderer shrieks "I am innocent," while the camera pans across endless fields of crosses. The fact that this mass murderer bears a marked resemblance to the late Heinrich Himmler makes the scene even more meaningful. […] Despite occasional awkwardly edited scenes and resulting minor confusions, the picture is an extraordinarily moving document, remarkably well acted by Ernest [sic] Borchert as the doctor, Hildegard Knef as the girl, and Arno Paulsen as the captain."

***Variety*, 25 August 1948**

"The first postwar German production, 'Murderers Among Us,' is a serious film concerned with the knotty problem of the individual German's guilt for Nazism. While not fully successful, either as drama or ideology, [the] film is marked by a superb camera and montage technique recalling some of the first rate German productions before the Nazi era. […] Although made in the Russian zone of Germany, the film is not weighted with heavy-handed propaganda. On the contrary, all the questions which it raises are left unanswered. Performances by the full cast measure up to the highest standards. Especially standout roles are turned in by Ernst Borchert, as the doctor, Arno Paulsen, as the captain, and Hildegard Knef, as the girl. Good score also contributes to the film's sombre quality.

***The Commonweal*, 27 August 1948 — "The Screen: Murder Murder Everywhere"**

"[…] From Germany has been imported 'Murderers Among Us' the first of the new films that indicates a return to the mastery of cinematic techniques which brought forth the great German movies of the 1920's. Although this picture isn't quite up to the top-notch items of the old days, it has been expertly directed by Wolfgang Staudte, who also wrote the script, and what it lacks in expensive production scenes it more than makes up for in good acting and the use of actual local sets of bombed-out Berlin. […] Hildegard Knef turns in a beautifully moving portrayal of the woman who falls in love with the doctor and helps him to get over the idea that peace is only a fleeting halt before the next massacre. I don't think that this film is by any means perfect or that it tells the whole story of the feeling in Germany of responsibility for Nazi horrors, but it is a start in the right direction; and it is a fascinating movie."

***Motion Picture Daily*, 1 September 1948 — "*Murderers Among Us*"**

"This film has excellent prospects of taking its place among the best of German pictures. Tautly and intensely the

production makes a strong case against the German "superman" knocked down to the status of a civilian and again enjoying freedom from the consequences of his crimes. The picture tells its story with the assistance of superlative acting and photography. "Murderers Among Us" is a picture art theatres should not pass up, for it unfolds the whole drab hopelessness of the Germans of today; its types are true to life. […] It is rare in that it speaks out frankly on the question of war guilt and war atrocities, and it sensitively treats the horrible dilemma of the German anti-Nazi who fought in the Wehrmacht and whose conscience is awake to the realization that he too is guilty. Hildegard Knef, Ernst Borchert and all others give top-notch performances. Direction and dialogue by Wolfgang Staudte is beyond reproach. A few of the scenes are too gaudy for U.S. consumption and should be cut."

***Hollywood Reporter*, 3 February 1949 — "*Murderers* Shows Revival In Germany"**

"*Murderers Amongst Us* is interesting as an indication that the German film industry is making a revival. The psychological drama, filmed in the Soviet zone of occupation and released in this country by Artkino, is a tragic drama of the aftermath of war. Its story is logical, well contrived, and arresting even in the face of some emotional excesses. The locale is the rubble of destroyed Berlin and in its way, the background contributes much to the relentless quality of the story. The direction of Wolfgang Staudte takes the fullest advantage of this pathetic panorama as by touches and camera angles he points up the stupid ironies of war. But his passion for artistic flourishes is distracting rather than effective in carrying the personalized story thread. Box office interest in the attraction may be heightened somewhat on the art theatre circuit by the presence in the case of Hildegarde Neff [sic], an actress who has been signed by David O. Selznick. Hers is the sincere talent of the trained continental artist and she may look forward to a promising career this side of the Atlantic. […] Technical credits are admirable considering the difficulties that must have characterized the production. The score and photography are splendid."

Screening *The Murderers Are among Us* in the UK

By Rosemary Stott

When *The Murderers Are among Us* was released in Great Britain in 1948, it achieved notoriety in the print media as the first new German film to be shown in the country since the Second World War. In fact, it was the first German film to have been released in the UK for ten years, marking "the freeing at last of the German cinema from the long imprisonment of Nazi direction."[1] The film's premiere was at the Academy Cinema on Oxford Street in Central London, where it was exhibited with English titles as *The Murderers Are Amongst Us*. It was shown from April 8, 1948 to June 11, 1948, a long run even by the standards of the day. Moreover, there were four shows daily during the week and two screenings on Sundays, in a double bill—a common format in those days—with the *The Flame of New Orleans* (USA, dir. René Clair, 1941). There was a German connection in the choice of the pairing of the films, because German-born actress Marlene Dietrich starred in *The Flame of New Orleans*.

The Murderers Are among Us was later exhibited in the provinces, first at the Tatler News Theatre in Bristol, where it was previewed on Thursday, July 1, 1948, then shown five times daily for a week as of Monday, July 5, 1948. It was advertised with the strapline: "Don't fail to see Germany's first postwar film of life in Berlin."[2] On Wednesday and Thursday, December 7 and 8, it was shown at the Regal Cinema in Duns, Berwickshire, as part of the *Curzon Nights* season.[3]

The film's successful distribution in the UK was thanks to the co-owner and managing director of the Academy Cinema in London, George M. Hoellering (1897-1980), who, by 1948, had established himself as a key figure in the postwar British cinema and art world. He started working at the Academy in 1937, alongside its director, Elsie Cohen. Cohen had been impressed by Hoellering's directorial debut, *Hortobágy* (*Life on the Hortobagy*, 1936), which he had brought to the UK from Hungary. Hoellering's work at the cinema was interrupted by the war, but he returned to the Academy in 1944, becoming its managing director and remaining so until his death in 1980.[4] The screening of *The Murderers Are among Us* was typical of his unique vision of bringing prestige European and world art house cinema to the UK through his distribution business, Film Traders Ltd. He acquired the rights for screenings in the UK from the Berlin office of *Sovexportfilm*, the film import-export company set up in 1945 in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany.[5] In later years, Hoellering was responsible for the exhibition of other films from the DEFA Studios at the Academy, including the Buchenwald drama *Naked Among Wolves* (dir. Frank Beyer), shortly after its premiere in East Germany on April 10, 1963.

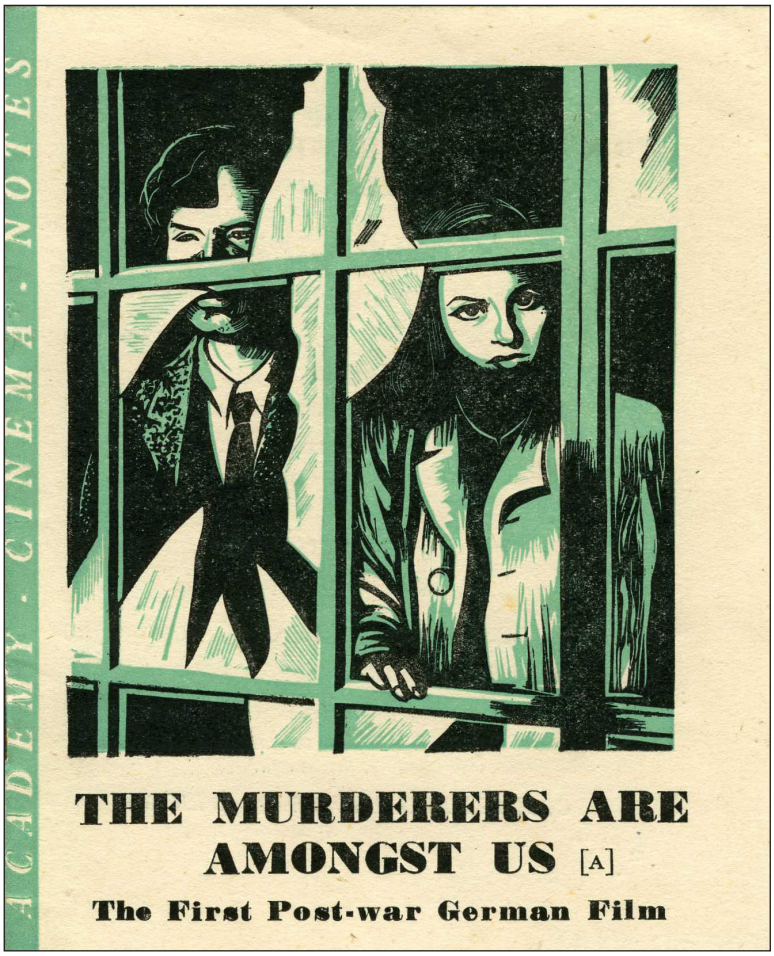
Hoellering, of Austro-Hungarian origin, had worked in Berlin as a filmmaker and producer from the early 1920s until 1932. There he had been employed by the leftist production company Prometheus as the production manager for *Kuhle Wampe, or Who Owns the World?* (1932), the avant-garde German film directed by Slatan Dudow and written by Bertolt Brecht.[6] To escape the Nazis, Hoellering had fled to Austria and subsequently to the UK. Although he never returned to Germany (or to Austria), after the war his excellent connections to the German creative community were important for the Academy Cinema throughout his long tenure. He was, for instance, close friends with German author and playwright Friedrich Wolf, himself a key artistic figure in the cultural affairs of early postwar Germany, including the establishment of DEFA.

After arriving in the UK in 1936, Hoellering spent a period during the war years interned on the Isle of Man, where he met Peter Strausfeld, a German graphic design artist. The two struck up a close friendship and later Hoellering invited Strausfeld to become the resident poster artist at the Academy Cinema. Strausfeld's graphic style was as steadfast as Hoellering's vision for the cinema's program. They were united in their commitment to cinema as a form of art—a concept established by the Weimar film tradition, in which they had both been immersed during their formative years. Strausfeld's love of the woodcut and linocut also drew directly on German Expressionist art of the late 1920s and early

1 "Post-War German Film." *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, West Yorkshire, England, April 8, 1948. 2.
2 Advertisement, *Western Daily Press*, Bristol, England, July 5, 1948.
3 *Berwickshire News and General Advertiser*, December 6, 1949.
4 Szekfü, András. "The Austro-Hungarian Film Director George M. Hoellering (1897–1980)." *Current Issues in Some Disciplines*. Komárno, Slovakia: International Research Institute sro, 2013. 51–57, here 57.
5 Sovexportfilm was known as Sojusintorgkino in 1945.
6 Szekfü, 51.

1930s—the art that the Nazis regarded as "degenerate." The image Strausfeld created for the Academy release of *The Murderers Are among Us* is thus thoroughly apt for a film that, itself, drew on Weimar film techniques.

British reviewers in 1948 believed the film to be of high artistic and dramatic merit and were deeply moved by it. They thought it had a humanitarian, albeit harrowing antiwar message, with one critic seeing it as the spiritual descendant of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (USA, dir. Lewis Milestone, 1930).[7] The film was discussed in terms of the legacy of Nazism, with particular attention paid to the characterization of Captain Brückner, whom one critic summed up as the "Himmler type."[8] The reviews highlighted the subtlety of his representation of the Nazi whose evil is concealed beneath a veil of mild-mannered, sentimental, middle-class behavior—a portrayal that was later to become a hallmark of the DEFA antifascist film. The critics found documentary realism in the film, identifying the "dead capital" of Berlin itself as a "principal player: the tangled, rat-infested ruin of Berlin, with a mean wind flapping the scaling wallpaper, and filling the air with dust from falling masonry."[9]



Cover of *Academy Cinema Notes*, 1948. © Design by Peter Strausfeld. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter, UK.

7 Majdalany, Fred. "Germany makes a film again." *Daily Mail*, April 9, 1948.
8 "Post-War German Film." *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, West Yorkshire, England, April 8, 1948. 2.
9 Lejeune, C.A. "In the Ruins of Berlin." *The Observer*, April 11, 1948.

But there were also vestiges of anti-German stereotypes and sentiment in the reviews, which reflected British attitudes of the period: the style is considered to be "markedly Germanic"—having "coarseness" and "heaviness"—and the tone of self-pity is considered "an unattractive trait."[10] General anti-German sentiment also results in an apologetic tone from some of the critics who reviewed the film favorably, for instance C.A. Lejeune, the pioneering female film critic at *The Observer*. In the case of the review in *The Spectator*, the film's negative attitude—"a seemingly chronic cynicism"[11]—tempers the praise the critic feels s/he can give to it.[11]

The reviews are further striking in terms of what is *not* mentioned. In particular, there is no reference to the film's provenance in the Soviet zone of Berlin or to the fact that it was made under a Soviet military license. By 1948, when the film was released in the UK, newspapers were carrying reports of increasing tensions among the military zones of Berlin. In the *Daily Mail* of April 9, 1948, Fred Majdalany's review of the film, which considers the film to be "of major proportions" and to "achieve the nobility of tragedy," somewhat paradoxically appeared on the same page as a report by Brian Connell entitled: "If the Russians force us out…." It begins:

> The Russian squeeze is still tightening on Berlin. Nothing that has happened during recent days of tension in the German capital has shaken the belief held in London and Washington that the Kremlin means to drive the Western Allies from Berlin, if it can, by all means short of force.[12]

Despite the precarious dynamics of the early postwar years, the exhibition of *The Murderers Are among Us* in the UK and the reception of the British press represented a milestone in reconciliation between two former enemy nations. It is telling that German emigrés in the UK, who themselves had contributed to film art in the Weimar era, played a pivotal role in bringing the film to a British public. Perhaps more importantly, in the estimation of the majority of the critics, the film achieved a level of artistic and technical merit comparable with Italian[13] and French films, as well as the best UFA films of the pre-Hitler era.[14]

Thanks to Andrew Hoellering and Professor Nicholas Strausfeld for giving their permission to reproduce the cover of the Academy Cinema Notes. Thanks as well to Professor András Szekfü, King Sigismund College, Budapest, Hungary, for additional material about George M. Hoellering.

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[10] *Daily Mail*, April 9, 1948.
[11] *The Spectator*, April 16, 1948. 13.
[12] Connell, Brian. "If the Russians force us out." *Daily Mail*, April 9, 1948. 2.
[13] The critic of the *Sunday Chronicle*, for example, compares it favorably with Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945).
[14] According to the critic of *The Guardian*, Staudte is the "true heir of Pabst and Lang." See: "New Films in London." *The Guardian*, April 10, 1948.

British Reviews

The Times, 8 April 1948 — "Academy Cinema: New German Film"

"The Murderers are Amongst Us—a pleasant title, it might seem, for an English-speaking adventure into the normal run of crime story and gangster plot.

But the film is not in the language; it is a German film, the first to be shown here since the war, and it is composed in those terms of neurotic intensity of which the German cinema is such a master. Also it poses so many different and difficult questions that it is hard to know where the spectator in a London battered but at least recognizable should begin. With Berlin, perhaps. For Berlin, as the camera here presents it, is so entirely a ruined and desolate city that anyone who lives there is automatically in the position of a microscopic entity attempting to come to terms with accumulations of dirt and dust as positive as evil. So much the film is, defensively, anxious to prove, and that same anxious preoccupation with its own mingling of guilt and helplessness is evident in the treatment of Dr. Mertens, the sensitive German who finds oblivion for his memories in drink and whose head whirls with the swinging skirts of the lost blue angels of the nineteen thirties. […] At least it succeeds magnificently in making clear, as no non-German film has done, the enemy; here is no jack-booted monster of Hollywood's imagining, but a mild, sentimental, middle-class husband who can, with no conscious hypocrisy, order a mass-murder of Polish men, women, and children on the same night as he decorates a Christmas tree. […] The film has all the technical devices which made the German screen memorable in the pre-Hitler years and is acted with a most impressive carefulness by Ernst Fischer [sic], as Dr. Mertens, Hildegard Knef, as the girl who saves him in spite of himself, and Arno Paulsen as the all-important Captain Bruckner."

Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 8 April 1948— "Post-War German Film"

"At the Academy Cinema tomorrow the first new German film to be seen in this country for 10 years will be shown. It marks the freeing at last of the German cinema from the long imprisonment of Nazi direction. It is 'The Murderers are Amongst Us,' a sincere and human story of Germans in the ruined Berlin of 1945, striving to remake their lives after the collapse of their country. There is some beautiful acting by Ernst Fischer [sic] as a drunken doctor, nerve-wracked by the horrors he has seen, and by Hildegard Knef as the girl who restores his self-respect. Arno Paulsen gives a fine presentment of the Himmler type, merciless in carrying out his Nazi orders in war, yet kindly and sentimental in his family life."

Daily Mail, 9 April 1948 — "Germany makes a film again," by Fred Majdalany

"The war inspired many important pictures and few great ones. The peace, although it has been shuddering along for three years, has so far produced none that matters. […] It has been left to defeated Germany to come along with the only film of major proportions that has so far emerged from the aftermath of war. This first post-war German picture, 'The Murderers are Amongst Us' (Academy), is the artistic descendant of the great Ufa films of 20 years ago and the spiritual descendant of 'All Quiet on the Western Front.' It is Germanic in the extreme. It is laden with neurosis and disillusion and the physical horror of shattered Berlin. It is very bitter. But as a study of broken human beings in whom hope is trying to break through despair it achieves the nobility of tragedy. […] Besides being an artistic and dramatic triumph, this film, by its honesty and truthfulness, makes the most moving plea to date for justice for the defeated."

The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948 • *The Murderers Are among Us* • A 2016 DVD Release by the DEFA Film Library

The Murderers Are among Us on US and UK Screens, 1948

The Guardian, 10 April 1948 — "New Films in London"

"Germany has sent us a film again. 'The Murderers Are Amongst Us' (at the Academy) is the first post-war German film to be seen here. It is a harrowing film; its impact is almost too strong – certainly too strong for disinterested pleasure. It shows in the first place considerable technical skill: very soon it becomes clear that whatever else the Germans have lost they have not lost the ability to use a moving camera. There are sequences in this film as grimly evocative as any that the French and Italian have given us since the war, but they have, too, that heaviness and that touch of coarseness which are among the German trade-marks. In a word, Wolfgang Staudte, the director, seems to be the true heir of Pabst and Lang. His film attempts to be the cameo of Germany just after the war."

The Observer, 11 April 1948 — "In The Ruins of Berlin," by C.A. Lejeune

"The new film is no drawing-room thriller, but a painful study of life among the ruins of Berlin during the first months after the capitulation. […] The dominant character of the film is the city itself: the tangled, rat-infested ruin of Berlin, with a mean wind flapping the scaling wallpaper and filling the air with dust from falling masonry. It is a terrible picture of a dead capital, and if the director intended it to be so, and seeks to invite pity for the bewildered people huddling back to it from the battle-field, the evacuation areas, and the concentration camps, who shall blame him? The whole edge of the film is set keen against war and war-makers, and if the style is markedly Germanic, the message is unaffectedly humanitarian. I am not ashamed to say that it moved me very deeply, and this is a case in which an honest critic must answer for himself alone."

Sunday Chronicle, 11 April 1948 — "Week's New Films," by Paul Dehn

"Hamlet said that conscience makes cowards of us all. Yet who should know more of conscience than defeated Germany or Italy? And has not the Italian conscience produced 'Open City,' which I had counted the most courageous picture to be made since the war – until I saw 'The Murderers Are Amongst Us' (Academy). […] Its universal message is the message of the trials at Nuremberg. Wherever it goes, it must be seen: and wherever it is seen in Britain, I trust it will excite the pity and the hope which mercifully are still the privilege of a civilized victor."

The Spectator, 16 April 1948 — "Contemporary Arts: the Cinema"

"It is ten years since a German picture has been shown on an English screen, and 'The Murderers Are Amongst Us' brings sharply to notice the vacuum. I was rather appalled to find that I could not separate my critical faculties and my emotions, and I am still abashed to know that, though this film is magnificently produced, exquisitely photographed and even ideologically acceptable, a seemingly chronic cynicism prevents me from giving it the praise it so richly deserves. […] The squalor in which these people live, the utter devastation of their surroundings, is truly incredible, and yet as I watched Fraulein Hildegard Knef's lovely sensitive face quietly suffering against the gaping window-frames I felt forced to remind her that self pity is an unattractive trait and that she should laugh in the face of adversity. Had she laughed, however, and pranced lightheartedly over the rubble singing 'Der Erlkönig' I should have rebuked her for having no sense of guilt…."