

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 241

### “I Am a Camera”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Berlin in the Twenties and early Thirties was a time of cultural and artistic ferment. The arts went avant-garde and the culture went libertine. It was as if, having shaken off the repressive autocratic traditionalism of Kaiser Wilhelm, Berliners were in a hurry to make up for lost time.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 241. I Am a Camera.

Today I want to focus on the social and cultural change Germany experienced in the aftermath of the war. The Great War brought about great social and cultural change across the entire world, and the decade of the 1920s is remembered most places for drastic, even shocking innovations. We can think of Germany as representative of the period, and what was happening in Germany was also going on, to some degree or another, everywhere in the world.

But there's something special, and especially dramatic, about the change you see in Germany between say, 1909 and 1929, and that's what I want to focus on today. The period is remembered as the “Golden Twenties” in Germany, and the cultural novelties of the time are often collectively referred to as “Weimar culture.” These innovations were not all unique to Germany; we'll see them elsewhere in the world, but they stand out in particular in Germany, because of the sharp contrast they make with the stuffy pre-war Imperial era that came before and with the...well, you already know what came after.

During the war, millions of young and healthy German men were drafted, meaning they were removed from their families and cut off from their communities and relationships with their wives and girlfriends, from parents, elders, clergy, and other authority figures, and placed in stressful and demanding circumstances in and behind the trenches. For as long as there have been soldiers, the life of a soldier has been hard, but the Great War saw the hardships of soldiery imposed on more young men than ever before.

And for as long as there have been soldiers, soldiers have sought comfort from the hardships of their profession through sexual intimacy, and especially through two particular forms of sexual intimacy that this era generally deplored: prostitution and homosexuality.

It is so very tempting to dismiss this behavior as the natural consequence of banding together large numbers of horny young men and depriving them of the more socially acceptable forms of sexual release, and then either deplore their lack of self-control, or smile indulgently at it.

But that is a simplistic attitude that doesn't take seriously the hardships a soldier endures, especially in wartime. I deliberately used the phrase "sexual intimacy" because this is as much about the intimacy as it is about the sex. Prostitution and homosexuality in the military are every bit as much an expression of a young person's yearning for intimacy as they are an outlet for simple lust. These soldiers can no longer turn to their parents, families, lovers, mentors, or any of those to whom civilians can turn when they need to share their innermost feelings. Intimacy is a commodity in short supply on the front lines of a world war, and you'll find that soldiers who hire prostitutes are often just as interested in dancing or sharing a drink or going for a walk as they are in sex.

But prostitution often leads to the spread of venereal disease. In a war like the Great War, where numbers mattered and every army wanted as many healthy soldiers at the front as possible, venereal disease was seen as hampering the war effort. The German military bowed to reality and organized approved military brothels, with prostitutes who got regular medical checkups, as a way of keeping their front-line soldiers hale and healthy. The militaries of Austria, Russia, and France did the same. Only the British and Americans bothered to talk about abstinence. And even in those armies, it was mostly talk.

Similarly, while in peacetime male soldiers found to be indulging in gay sex would likely be punished or discharged, wartime commanders had strong incentives to look the other way. The result of all this is that male soldiers in the Great War were removed from their civilian authority figures and entrusted to military authority figures who were sending them very clear signals that sexual relations outside a committed relationship or even with other young men were permissible and excusable, even if not something to be acknowledged publicly.

On the flip side, consider the young women back home. Times were tough in Germany during the war. Some women, especially among the poor and working class, were forced to turn to prostitution. Other women took jobs that would have gone to their male peers in peacetime. After the war, with so many young men of their generation lost, young women found they could no longer follow the pre-war prescription of proper behavior in a young lady, that is, to feign complete disinterest in young men and wait for them to make the first move. Gender roles blurred. Young women wore short skirts. Or pants. Smoked cigarettes. Drank liquor in public places.

The 1920s saw these young men and those young women reunited in a world that also scorned traditional authority figures—you know, the people who told them how important it was to fight and win this war that most people now regarded as pointless and destructive. The result was a degree of sexual freedom unprecedented in modern history. Homosexuality was still technically a crime in Germany, but in many places, especially Berlin, the law went unenforced. Gender roles were changing in new and unprecedented ways, and gender fluidity became accepted. The *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, that is, The Institute for the Science of Sexuality, was founded in Berlin in 1919 and became not only an early advocate for the legal and social acceptance of homosexuality but also the institution that pioneered what we today call gender reassignment surgery.

The German Revolution brought about a new constitution that guaranteed freedom of expression. This led to a flourishing of pornography. In 1920, pornography could include sexy paintings and photographs and even a few films, but most pornography was still in the form of the written word. I would note that the very term *pornography* comes from Greek and literally means “writing about sex.” The 1920s saw the publication of books that never would have been allowed in the days of the Kaiser, novels about prostitutes or life in a harem, and both fiction and non-fiction that touched upon such previously taboo topics such as homosexuality, bondage, exotic sexual positions, sadomasochism, trial marriages, *ménages a trois*, and so on.

The nightlife in Berlin included tiny clubs and cabarets that catered exclusively to nudists, or gay men, or gay women, or gay men and gay women, or the transgendered, and featured queer and cross-dressing entertainments. There were hundreds of such establishments in the Berlin of the 1920s. The churches and the political right were appalled at this degradation of the public morals, but their protests went unheeded.

But Weimar culture wasn't only about loose morals and cross dressing. It was also an explosion of the avant-garde in the arts. The old Imperial regime was conservative and repressive. As a result, you had to go to cities like Vienna or Paris to experience the modern in art and culture. Berlin by comparison was a cultural backwater. The Great War brought three great changes to this framework. Vienna, no longer an imperial capital, declined in cultural significance, while New York City in the United States became a new center of culture that challenged the best in Europe. We'll definitely be talking about New York in episodes to come. But perhaps the most remarkable change was the ascension of Berlin as a cultural capital. German artists, musicians, and performers, stifled for years by their fuddy-duddy Kaiser and his regime, raced to catch up and surpass their peers in other countries. For a time, say from 1925 to 1933, Berlin was one of the most important, perhaps *the* most important, cultural centers in the world.

[music: “At the Jazz Band Ball”]

The most distinctive, though not the only, artistic style of the Weimar period was German Expressionism, a form open to bending reality in order to express emotion and mood. In German

literature, a classic from this period is *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin, a novel about a murderer recently released from prison and navigating the Berlin of the 1920s. There is Thomas Mann, winner of the 1929 Nobel Prize for Literature. His most noted work is probably *Der Tod in Venedig*, or *Death in Venice*, a semi-autobiographical novel about an author suffering from writer's block who visits Venice and becomes obsessed with a teenage boy.

And I couldn't possibly avoid mentioning Erich Maria Remarque, himself a war veteran, who wrote the most important German novel about the Great War, perhaps the most important in any language, *In Westen nichts Neues*, which literally means *Nothing New in the West*, but is usually rendered in English as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It was published in November 1928, on the tenth anniversary of the Armistice and is a novel about a German youth named Paul Bäumer, who is moved by patriotic speeches to volunteer for military service only to suffer the horrors and deprivations of the Western Front and on visits home finds himself strangely alienated from his civilian friends and family. The title comes from the language of a German military communiqué set out at the end of the book, the irony being that "nothing new in the west" is the report sent home on the day Paul is killed on the front line.

The English title of the novel has become so familiar that in our time it is a colloquial way of saying, "nothing is going on," which totally misses the irony.

In terms of live entertainment, the best-known and most notable in Berlin in this period was the cabaret scene. Cabarets existed before the war, but they were heavily policed, especially in conservative Prussia. They offered the usual mix of song, dance, comedy, and skits, but after the war and in the new and much more liberal Republic, Berlin cabarets got a lot raunchier and their comedy became sharply political.

Legitimate theatre also became political, with left-wing themes becoming common. A major figure in German theatre of this time was the Austrian-born director and producer Max Reinhardt, who introduced expressionist stage designs and put on modernist plays such as George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, written shortly after the 1920 canonization of Joan of Arc and described by Shaw as a story without villains and the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello's 1921 absurdist play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

I should also mention at least in passing the producer/director Erwin Piscator and his productions of *Rasputin* and *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik*, the latter a black comedy about a Czech soldier in the Austrian Army during the war.

Several of Reinhardt's and Piscator's most notable productions were also notable for the backstage contributions of an up-and-comer in the world of German theatre, an annoying twenty-something Bavarian draft dodger named Bertholt Brecht. His first staged play was produced in 1922: *Drums in the Night*, about a war veteran revolutionary. It won the Kleist Prize, a prestigious German literary award and shone a spotlight on this promising young writer. In 1926, when Brecht was 28, he discovered Karl Marx and was never the same afterward.

Brecht achieved his greatest success two years later with *Die Dreigroschenoper*, or *The Threepenny Opera*, described as a “play with music,” the music being provided by the 28-year-old composer Kurt Weill. I mentioned this work once before, back in episode 227. It was based on *The Beggar’s Opera*, a 1724 satirical opera by the English poet John Gay, produced in the days when the English were all in on making fun of everything Italian, especially opera. Like the original, *The Threepenny Opera* is set in London’s underworld and is meant as a satire of upper class society; in Brecht’s version it’s also a satire of capitalist society. Weill’s music incorporated the then-wholly-new sound of American jazz. Socialist commentary though it may have been, bourgeois German theatergoers loved it and it became both Brecht’s and Weill’s most successful work, and the show’s standout song, “The Ballad of Mack the Knife” remains popular even in our time. Brecht next wrote *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, his own take on the story of Joan of Arc, this one set in the Chicago stockyards. Brecht also collaborated with Weill on 1930’s *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*, or *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, another satire of American society, or maybe a satire of German society. The German right wing certainly took it as the latter and greeted it with hostility.

Speaking of music, if you’ve been listening to this podcast from the beginning, you surely remember the name Richard Strauss, Germany’s pre-eminent composer before the war. I should name drop Strauss’s 1911 opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, The Knight of the Rose, as it is one of his most famous works. During the war, Strauss composed *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *The Woman without a Shadow*, which was not performed on stage until after the Armistice. Strauss composed three more operas during the Weimar period, *Intermezzo*, *Die ägyptische Helena* and *Arabella*.

But Strauss turned sixty in 1924, too old to play the role of bad boy of German music any longer. A whole new generation of composers was arising, one for whom Strauss was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic fuddy-duddy. Strauss was sometimes supportive of the experimental work of younger composers, sometimes not. It is said that after hearing a performance of Paul Hindemith’s *Second Quartet* in 1921, he asked Hindemith, “Why do you write this atonal stuff? You have talent!” To which Hindemith replied, “You make your music and I’ll make mine.”

Of course, and speaking of atonal music, it is the Viennese Arnold Schönberg who may be the composer you think of first when you think of German music in this period. Schönberg, who was only a decade younger than Strauss, began his career as a composer with conventional Romanticism, but by the time of the war was gradually drifting toward atonality, in parallel with his friend, the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, who was drifting from representational to abstract painting.

Schönberg didn’t like the word *atonal*, by the way. He didn’t like that it defined his music by what it was not, that is, tonal. He preferred the term *pantonal* music. In 1924, the year Schönberg turned 50, he was invited to succeed the recently deceased Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni as instructor of composition at the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin. From this perch, Schönberg

became a huge influence on the new generation of composers, especially Alban Berg and Anton Webern.

You can think of atonal music as perhaps the musical analog of the German Expressionism that was all the rage at the time, though audiences were slow to embrace the new sound. Well, you could say, and his defenders did say, that audiences were also slow to embrace the innovations of Beethoven or Wagner. Still, Beethoven and Wagner were eventually accepted, whereas audiences remain cool toward atonal music even now, a hundred years later. Make of that what you will.

As far as music performance at this time, German orchestras and conductors were the finest in the world. Some of those conductors have names still known today, at least by those of us who listen to old recordings. In addition to Richard Strauss, who also had quite a career as a conductor as well, you find Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Bruno Walter, George Szell, Otto Klemperer, and Arturo Toscanini.

[music: Schönberg, *String Quartet No. 2*]

I've used this term "German Expressionism" a couple of times now, and it is key to understanding the art of this period, especially the visual arts, so I should say a few more words about it. Expressionism began in the realm of painting, during the Belle Époque, and it is in essence a subjective visual style in which realism is sacrificed for the sake of conveying emotion and mood. The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, painted in 1893, is a classic example you are likely familiar with.

German Expressionism pervaded the arts in postwar Germany, at least in the early years of the Weimar period. Also during this period the theories of Sigmund Freud, which also developed during the Belle Époque, spread beyond academics and professionals and began percolating into the arts. The collision of Expressionism with Freudianism gives us the German variant, in which artists use visual cues in an attempt to depict, or trigger, all those repressed unconscious feelings Dr. Freud was always talking about.

You find German Expressionism in many places, but where it is most clearly seen, and where its influence was most deeply felt, was and is in the realm of cinema. When the Great War began, there were about two thousand cinemas in Germany and a thousand in Austria-Hungary. But remember that this is the era of silent film. Silent films are far easier to export across national borders; all you have to do is change the intertitles, which is much easier than recording a whole new soundtrack or adding subtitles. So German cinemas mostly showed foreign films, and the domestic film industry's product tended to be simple and derivative of what was being done in France or the United States.

The French film industry declined after the war, while the US film industry dominated the world; this is a topic I'll be taking up in the next episode. In 1920, out of an estimated one thousand motion pictures produced worldwide, eight hundred came from the US.

But Germany, along with Japan and the Soviet Union, was one of the few nations to develop a thriving independent film industry during the Twenties. The first German film that really broke new ground and made the rest of the world sit up and take notice was 1913's *The Student of Prague*, which is a creepy pact-with-the-Devil film based on a story by Edgar Allan Poe. It was feature length and by far the most expensive film produced in Germany to that time. It was also a critical and commercial success and its pioneering cinematography and special effects made it compelling.

The Great War cut off the importation of foreign films, which proved to be a boon for domestic German filmmakers. This was especially true after 1916, when the German government took note of how effectively Allied governments were using motion pictures as a propaganda tool and began commissioning their own films about the need for patriotic sacrifice. The audience appetite for these films was limited though, so filmmakers needed to add a spoonful of comic or dramatic shorts to help the medicine go down.

By 1920, the number of German cinemas had almost doubled, and whereas the pre-war cinemas had often been small, dark spaces converted from shops and restaurants, the new ones were expansive theatres that could seat hundreds in purpose-built auditoriums.

That year, 1920, saw both German cinema and German Expressionism proclaim themselves to the world with a groundbreaking film that would prove to be an enormous influence on the new medium, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. It's been called the world's first horror film; it's about a hypnotist who uses his unwitting patients to commit murder. And here you see the German Expressionist style in full flower, with the use of lighting, grotesque shadows, and unnerving camera angles to add creepiness to an already creepy story. The film's special sets and props were constructed with unnatural twists and curves to create an unsettling mood meant to reflect the mental state of the characters.

Two years later, another classic of German cinema was released: *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, which also made good use of Expressionist techniques. This was a retelling of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; famously, the filmmakers decided to tell essentially the same story, but change the names to avoid having to pay a royalty. Stoker's estate sued anyway and won their case. Yes, it happened in those days, too.

The 1920s saw the German film industry grow to become the second-largest in the world after the US, and the studio that grew to be the largest film studio in Germany was *Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft*, which translates into English as Universe Film Corporation, though it is usually known by its initials, UFA, which are often pronounced "oofa." UFA was established during the war, in 1917, but grew into a powerhouse during the decade following the Armistice.

Perhaps UFA's most memorable film from this period was 1927's *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang, a feature-length silent film that is also among the first feature-length science fiction films. *Metropolis* carries a clear socialist message, depicting a future dystopia with a sharp class divide between the rulers of its titular city and the working class that keeps the city running. *Metropolis* is an innovative film that includes perhaps the first cinematic depiction of a robot, although it is marred by a saccharine ending. H.G. Wells, who covered this same ground in his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, dismissed the film as "trite," but it's still visually impressive.

Speaking of robots, now might be a good time to mention the Czech writer Karl Čapek, who wrote a play titled *R.U.R.* that was first performed at the National Theatre in Prague in newly independent Czechoslovakia on January 25, 1921. *R.U.R.* stands for *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti*, which was rendered in English as "Rossum's Universal Robots." It is a story of a factory that makes artificial people, which the play calls *robots*. These robots seem happy to labor for their human masters at first, but ultimately rebel and wipe out the human race.

The play was a huge success, and within a couple of years had been translated into many languages and performed around the world. In our time, it is notable for giving the English language, and indeed many other languages including Czech, the word *robot*, which Čapek derived from the Czech word *robotá*, which means forced labor. The robots in the play are synthetic organisms, more like the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* (you know which ones I mean) rather than actual machines. The concept of mechanical people had already existed for centuries in imaginative fiction, but this new word *robot* quickly displaced the older terms for such speculative constructions, words such as *automaton* and *android*, and eventually *robot* even became the name for certain kinds of real-world machines that duplicate the work of humans, although even in our time, fully self-directed humanoid machines exist only in science fiction.

In 1930, UFA released *Der blaue Engel*, or *The Blue Angel*, directed by Josef von Sternberg. This was Germany's first feature film with sound, a comic tragedy about a respected schoolteacher who falls in love with a cabaret singer and it destroys him. It was produced in German- and English-language versions and the film was a huge success, both domestically and internationally, and it also made an international star out of the woman who played the cabaret singer, the 28-year-old Marlene Dietrich. The song she performs in the film, known in English as "Falling in Love Again," became her signature song. It is Dietrich and her performance of this song that Mel Brooks was parodying in his 1974 film *Blazing Saddles*, with Madeline Kahn in the Marlene Dietrich role.

German cinema of this era would influence cinema everywhere, especially in the United States, as many of the biggest names in German film ended up in Hollywood, either drawn there by the larger paychecks, or later as political refugees, including people like Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang, Michael Curtiz, Billy Wilder, and of course Marlene Dietrich.



German Expressionism would also find a home in American films, particularly in films centered on crime or horror. You can find it in the works of Alfred Hitchcock or Orson Welles, and in our time Tim Burton, whose films such as *Beetlejuice*, *Batman*, *The Nightmare before Christmas* and *Edward Scissorhands*, among others, show the German influence clearly. You also find it in some comic books, excuse me, graphic novels. Many uses of odd camera angles, lenses, and focus choices are legacies of German Expressionism. I'm no expert on cinematography, so an exhaustive list of cinematographic techniques is beyond my skill set, but I have to point out at least the so-called Dutch angle, which isn't Dutch. It's actually Deutsch angle, *deutsch* as in German. That's the technique of filming with the camera tipped at an angle, which makes the shot feel askew, conveying a sense of unease or unreality and it is often used to represent anxiety, insanity, or intoxication.

[music: "At the Jazz Band Ball"]

Weimar art was bristling with new ideas and techniques, and many of them were controversial. But one of the most controversial creative innovations of the German Republic was its signature school of architecture, the Bauhaus. On the face of it, this seems strange, because unlike say, music or paintings or films, buildings have certain fundamental features no artistic movement can dismiss. Painters can abandon realism, composers can abandon tonality, filmmakers can set their cameras at an angle, but architects can't abandon walls or roofs or windows. And yet the Bauhaus managed to attract a huge amount of attention and criticism.

The Bauhaus school of architecture was literally a school, and its name literally means "house of building." It was founded by Walter Gropius, whom we previously met in episode 50. Born in Berlin, Gropius married the widow of Gustav Mahler and served in the German Army. His wife Alma got into a relationship with novelist Franz Werfel while Gropius was in military service, and the two divorced in 1920. In April 1919, Gropius accepted a position as director of a new arts school in Weimar, a school formed by the merger of two existing art schools. It was Gropius who dubbed it the Bauhaus, and the intention was to create a school that combined architecture, crafts, and fine art.

I'm going to do my best to summarize the Bauhaus look, or the International Style, as it is sometimes called, in a minute or so, although it's a topic worthy of a full episode. It is at least in part a reaction to the very stylized look of the Art Nouveau, which was popular before the war. The Bauhaus philosophy was modernism. It celebrated modern materials like steel and concrete and modern technology. It rejected the ornate look of the Art Nouveau as costly and pretentious. In the new socialist world, buildings should be simple, practical, and inexpensive, for the working class, not for the bourgeoisie. You even see it in the furniture, which tends toward square and formed from tubular steel.

Bauhaus buildings tended to be boxy, with flat roofs and lots and lots of identical windows. The Bauhaus look eschewed ornamentation. Why should we seek to conceal the wonders of modern materials like steel and concrete and glass? We should be proud to display them.

If you'll indulge me for a moment of personal reflection, I never really "got" the Bauhaus movement until 1999, the year I toured the Tower Bridge in London. That's the bridge that everyone thinks is the London Bridge. The Tower Bridge was completed in 1894 and was a technological marvel of its day. It's a drawbridge, you see, and it needs to open and close very quickly, so as not to unduly disrupt either road traffic across the bridge or river traffic underneath. But someone who didn't know any better could be forgiven for mistaking it for a much older structure, because although its two towers, which support the bridge, are made of steel, they are clad in stone carved in a Gothic Revival style that gives them a medieval feel. It also disguises the fact that the steel skeletons of the towers are crucial to making the whole thing work. They look very nice, but the bridge design was criticized even in its own time for the deceptive presentation of the towers. A Bauhaus student would ask why the design should conceal rather than celebrate the modern steel construction that makes the bridge possible.

The Bauhaus school was primarily interested in making an artistic argument in favor of an austere essentialism. Gropius was in fact more interested in making a statement and training a new generation of artists, and especially architects, than he was in commissions. In fact he and the other architects who championed this style won very few commissions. There's the Bauhaus building itself; I'll post a picture of it on the website. Gropius did get a commission in 1920 to design a monument to the workers who were killed resisting the Kapp Putsch of that year, episode 213. The monument is a fine example of Weimar art. I'll post a picture of it on the website as well. The subsequent regime paid the monument the highest compliment there was in the Nazi vocabulary: they called it "degenerate art" and had it destroyed in 1936.

Both Walter Gropius, the first director of the Bauhaus, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the last director of the Bauhaus, emigrated to the United States after the Nazis closed the school, which ultimately led to the surprising development that Cold War American elites of government, business and finance embraced the International Style and dotted the skylines of American cities with an architecture conceived by a bunch of German socialist idealists that never really caught on in its home country, but was now the preferred look of American capitalism. The American journalist Tom Wolfe analyzed this development at length in his 1981 book *From Bauhaus to Our House*, subtitled *Why Architects Can't Get Out of the Box*.

But whatever you may think of the International Style, it is undeniable that many of the most prominent German artists of this period, including many I've named in this episode, fled Germany during the Nazi period and finished out their careers in the United States, ultimately became great creative influences in this country, to the enrichment of the US and the detriment of Germany. Huh. It's almost as if there is a lesson to be learned here, if only I could figure out what it was...

So what are we to make of Weimar culture? In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Weimar period was often depicted as decadent. The German-American historian Peter Gay, himself a refugee from the Nazis, famously described the artists of the Weimar period as “dancing on the edge of a volcano.”

In the English-speaking world, our view of Weimar Germany is heavily influenced by the British-American writer Christopher Isherwood, a gay man who was drawn to Berlin by the opportunity to live more or less openly as a gay man. He lived there from 1929 to 1933. His 1939 autobiographical novel *Goodbye to Berlin* paints this image of a reckless hedonism with fascism rising in the background. American playwright John van Druten adapted it into a play in 1951. The play was titled *I Am a Camera*, which are the first words of the novel. *I Am a Camera* was made into a British motion picture in 1955, directed by Henry Cornelius and starring Julie Harris and Laurence Harvey. The film version of *I Am a Camera* was highly controversial in its day, owing to the behavior of the female lead character, Sally Bowles, who is sexually promiscuous and gets an abortion, both taboo subjects in the 1950s.

More successful was the 1966 stage musical inspired by *I Am a Camera*, with songs by John Kander and Fred Ebb and retitled *Cabaret*. It won eight Tony awards including Best Musical, and led to yet another adaptation, the most famous, the 1972 musical film *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse and starring Liza Minelli, Michael York, and Joel Grey. The film version was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won eight, including Best Actress for Liza Minelli, Best Supporting Actor for Joel Grey, and Best Director for Bob Fosse.

And it is through the lens of *Cabaret* that most people are introduced to Weimar culture, a vision of the period in which Berliners indulge in booze and sex and cocaine and endless partying in a frenzied effort to avoid confronting the horror that is slowly rising all around them. But in defense of the Weimar period, I should point out that they may have been dancing on the edge of a volcano, but they couldn't see the coming eruption nearly so well as we can with the benefit of hindsight. And if the politicians and the industrialists and the military leaders, the real elites of Weimar Germany, averted *their* eyes from the looming catastrophe, how harshly can we criticize the artists and entertainers of the age, who had far less power to affect the outcome, from doing the same?

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Justin and Maxwell for their kind donations, and thank you to Philip for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Justin and Maxwell and Philip help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn from metaphorical cameras to real ones, and talk about the heyday of Hollywood silent films. *Dos, Don'ts, and Be Carefuls*, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Among these Weimar-era artists who left Germany during the Nazi period was Bertholt Brecht. He spent a few years in Scandinavia, during which he continued to write plays, including *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* and a less literal critique of fascism, *Life of Galileo*. He eventually emigrated to the United States, where he continued to write plays, including *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*, an allegory of the rise of Hitler set in the world of Chicago mobsters, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a modernist and socialist retelling of a classic Chinese play.

Brecht also wrote a Hollywood film, the anti-Nazi *Hangmen Also Die!* Released in 1943, this film is notable because in addition to Brecht's involvement, it was directed by Fritz Lang and scored by Austrian composer Hanns Eisler. Both Lang and Eisler, like Brecht, were refugees from the Nazis.

After the war, Brecht was blacklisted for his Communist sympathies and made to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He returned to Europe and settled in the German Democratic Republic, where he was initially supportive of the Communist government there, although he soon became disillusioned with it. He composed a famous poem, in response to the claim by a Communist government functionary that the people had lost the confidence of the government, in which he puckishly suggests that the government should therefore dissolve the people and elect another one.

Bertholt Brecht died of a heart attack in Berlin in 1956, at the age of 58.

[music: Closing Theme]