Name: _____ Date: _____ Class Period: _____

APRIL 1945, A NATION AWAITS ITS...

DOWNFALL



film education

STUDY GUIDE



SYNOPSIS

Set in Berlin 1945, DOWNFALL retells the final days of the Second World War as recorded in the diaries of Adolf Hitler's private secretary, Traudl Junge, while barricaded with Hitler and his closest confidants in the Führer's secret bunker. This unprecedented and controversial insider's perspective is a gripping insight into the madness and desperation of Hitler in the final hours of the war as the Russian Army closes a ring around Berlin.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the domination of Hollywood films throughout the world, we are used to seeing war films from the American/British point of view, or told in a 'Hollywood' way. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* are good examples of this, along with the television series *Band of Brothers*. One could say that the dominant narrative of the Second World War is now constructed by Hollywood.

It is only recently that Germany has started to examine its own wartime experience through films such as *Das Boot* and the television series *Heimat* and now *Downfall*.

Downfall is not a documentary, but a narrative drama. It is based on real events, but the scriptwriters and director have also used their imagination in recreating the events of April 1945. Striking a balance between good filmmaking and accurate history can often be difficult.



FILMS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE?

Before we start to look at any films which are based on historical subjects we need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of using a narrative drama (as opposed to documentary footage) as a piece of source material for understanding historical events. What do you think the advantages and disadvantages are of looking at a narrative drama as a piece of evidence about a particular historical period?

Before we look at film let's look at history itself:

TASK

In pairs, discuss, the following questions:

Is what we read in history books 'true'?

How can we discover what really happened in the past?

Do we just have to think about what happened in the past? Do we have to ask other questions about events?

When we talk about the past are we talking about events, individuals or a combination of both?

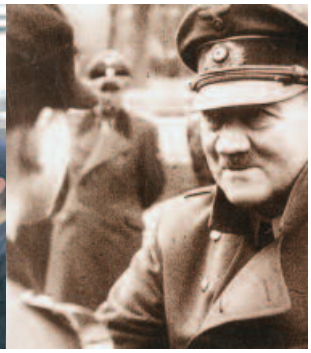
Is it important to think about who wrote the history book?

In thinking about *Downfall*, we need to consider the subject matter of the film – Hitler's final days in the bunker as well as the events in Berlin – and think about the ways in which people arrive at the cinema with a lot of ideas, thoughts and feelings about this topic already in place. Because the film is based on actual events we need to ask the following questions:

1. What are the essential practices and intentions of a working historian? What is an historian's purpose in carrying out their work and what rules do they keep to?
2. What are the essential practices and intentions of a feature filmmaker, of a documentary filmmaker and of a newsreel editor/director?
3. How do each of the practices of the filmmakers relate to the practices of the historian? In what way are they similar and in what ways do they differ?



Image from film *Downfall*



Archive image of Hilter

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BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Downfall is about the last few days of Hitler and his Third Reich, and the fall of Berlin near the end of the Second World War. But what if you had never heard of any of these things?

How much does the film assume that you already know about Hitler's Nazi regime? For example, the Holocaust is never mentioned. Is it fair for the filmmakers to assume that the viewers come to the film with some background knowledge? Is this knowledge necessary to understand the film?

TASK

Imagine you see the film without ever having heard of Hitler and the Nazis before. Imagine how you might read the film differently if you did not know any details of what Hitler did. Do you think it is the filmmakers' responsibility to explain some background to the events of April 1945 or is it fair to assume that people already know about them?

Considering that *Downfall* may be the first detailed information that some people get about Hitler and his associates, what responsibilities, if any, do the filmmakers have?



REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTERS

The film *Downfall* has caused some debate over whether it presents Hitler in a sympathetic light. Do you think this view is justified? Did you find yourself feeling sympathy with the figure of Hitler and, if so, how do you feel about this?

Reading about the actual events of Hitler's days in the bunker, do you think the filmmakers have exaggerated or played down anything and if so, what? How do you think audiences in Germany and in the UK may view this film differently?

TASK 1

Write a list of the characters in the film that you felt sympathetic towards. What made you feel more sympathetic towards them? Were there any characters that you did not feel any sympathy for? Why?

TASK 2

The film *Downfall* focuses closely on the actions and decisions of the main characters in the bunker. How important were the decisions taken by the characters in making things happen?

Think of the important decisions that characters make in the film *Downfall* and write them down. For each of the decisions that you have written down, explain what the consequences were (you may not be able to do this for every event). Do you think you were shown the consequences of characters' decisions and actions often enough?





THE WRITER EXPLAINS

Bernd Eichinger, the writer and producer of *Downfall* has written about the film as follows:

> *"The final days [in Berlin] tell us a lot about how the mass fanaticism functioned in the regime's earlier years and how it continued until the bitter end.... In terms of German film history, we are breaking new ground here, since there is no cinematic frame of reference ... We wanted to shoot this film in the German language with German actors and a German director. The Nazi regime and World War II are certainly the most traumatic events in German history. My generation was born after the war, but of course it is our history too and we have to deal with it. I think it was time for German filmmakers to have the courage to bring this material to the screen themselves. It should be a statement to all generations that intolerance, racism and fanaticism lead inexorably into the abyss."*

Why do you think Eichinger felt it so important that the film was made in Germany?

Eichinger, in the quotation above, talks about exploring issues of intolerance, racism and fanaticism. Taking each of these themes, think of moments from the film which illustrate each one.

POINTS OF VIEW

It has been said that the historian has an obligation to relate all known evidence to his theme, not forgetting that which contradicts it. Thus, the historian has to present as many views of a particular event or subject as possible before coming to judgements. Can a filmmaker present many points of view? And can different films give us different perspectives on the same event?

Whose point of view do we follow in the film *Downfall?* What reasons could there be for this? Do you think the film explores different perspectives and if so, how? Do you think the film gives a balanced perspective on events?

TASK

Imagine you were the scriptwriter of *Downfall* and director Oliver Hirschbiegel asks you to write in another character whose point of view we would follow for several scenes. Who would you choose and why? What scenes would you use to represent this character's experiences?

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STUDY GUIDE

Free online study guide including a day-by-day account of events in Berlin and in the bunker is available from: **www.filmeducation.org**
Official film website: **www.downfallthefilm.com**

Written by Ian Wall and Deborah Oliver. Produced and designed by Film Education for Momentum Pictures. ©2005 Film Education.

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21-22 Poland Street London W1F 8QQ T 020 7851 9450 F 020 7439 3218 E postbox@filmeducation.org W www.filmeducation.org