

# The Great Dictator

Charles Chaplin USA 1940 125m



In 1938, the world's most famous movie star began to prepare a film about the monster of the 20th century. Charlie Chaplin looked a little like Adolf Hitler, in part because Hitler had chosen the same toothbrush moustache as the Little Tramp. Exploiting that resemblance, Chaplin devised a satire in which the dictator and a Jewish barber from the ghetto would be mistaken for each other. The result, released in 1940, was "The Great Dictator," Chaplin's first talking picture and the highest-grossing of his career, although it would cause him great difficulties and indirectly lead to his long exile from the United States.

In 1938, Hitler was not yet recognized in all quarters as the embodiment of evil. Powerful isolationist forces in America preached a policy of nonintervention in the troubles of Europe, and rumors of Hitler's policy to exterminate the Jews were welcomed by anti-Semitic groups. Some of Hitler's earliest opponents, including anti-Franco American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, were later seen as "premature antifascists"; by fighting against fascism when Hitler was still considered an ally, they raised suspicion that they might be communists. "The Great Dictator" ended with a long speech denouncing dictatorships, and extolling democracy and individual freedoms. This sounded to the left like bedrock American values, but to some on the right, it sounded pinko.

If Chaplin had not been "premature," however, it is unlikely he would have made the film at all. Once the horrors of the Holocaust began to be known, Hitler was no longer funny, not at all. The Marx Brothers, ahead of the curve, made "Duck Soup" in 1933, with Groucho playing the dictator Rufus T. Firefly in a comedy that had ominous undertones about what was already under way in Europe. And as late as 1942, the German exile Ernst Lubitsch made "To Be or Not to Be," with Jack Benny as an actor who becomes embroiled in the Nazi occupation of Poland.

Chaplin's film, aimed obviously and scornfully at Hitler himself, could only have been funny, he says in his autobiography, if he had not yet known the full extent of the Nazi evil. As it was, the film's mockery of Hitler got it banned in Spain, Italy and neutral Ireland. But in America and elsewhere, it played with an impact that, today, may be hard to imagine. There had never been any fictional

character as universally beloved as the Little Tramp, and although Chaplin was technically not playing the Tramp in "The Great Dictator," he looked just like him, this time not in a comic fable but a political satire.

The plot is one of those concoctions that makes the action barely possible. The hero, a barber-soldier in World War I, saves the life of a German pilot named Schultz and flies him to safety, all the time not even knowing he was the enemy. Their crash-landing gives the barber amnesia, and for 20 years he doesn't know who he is. Then he recovers and returns to his barber shop in the country of Tomania (say it aloud), only to discover that the dictator Hynkel has come to power, not under the swastika, but under the Double Cross. His storm troopers are moving through the ghetto, smashing windows and rounding up Jews (the term "concentration camp" is used early, matter-of-factly). But the barber's shop is spared by the intervention of Schultz, now an assistant minister, who recognizes him.

The barber (never named, just like the Tramp) is in love with the maid Hannah (Paulette Goddard, Chaplin's estranged wife at the time). And he is befriended by his former neighbors. But he and the disloyal Schultz are eventually put in a concentration camp, and then Hynkel has a boating mishap, is mistaken for the barber, and locked into the camp just as the barber and Schultz escape -- with Hynkel's uniform. Now the barber is assumed by everyone to be the dictator.

In the classic Chaplin tradition, the movie has a richness of gags and comic pantomime, including Hynkel's famous ballet with an inflated balloon that makes the globe his plaything. There is a sequence where five men bite into puddings after being told the one who finds a coin must give his life to assassinate Hynkel. None of them want to find the coin and there is cheating, but eventually -- see for yourself. And there is a long, funny episode when the dictator of neighboring Bacteria, Benzini Napaloni (Jack Oakie), pays a state visit. Napaloni, obviously modeled on Mussolini, eludes an attempt to make him sit in a low chair so the short Hynkel can loom over him. And when the two of them sit in adjacent barber chairs, they take turns pumping their chairs higher than the other. There is also a lot of confusion about saluting, and Chaplin intercuts shots of the two dictators with newsreels of enormous, cheering crowds.

In 1940, this would have played as very highly charged, because Chaplin was launching his comic persona against Hitler in an attempt, largely successful, to ridicule him as a clown. Audiences reacted strongly to the film's humor; it won five Oscar nominations, for picture, actor, supporting actor (Oakie), screenplay and music (Meredith Willson). But audiences at the time, and ever since, have felt that the film comes to a dead end when the barber, impersonating Hynkel, delivers a monologue of more than three minutes which represents Chaplin's own views.

Incredibly, no one tries to stop the fake "Hynkel." Chaplin talks straight into the camera, in his own voice, with no comic touches and only three cutaways, as the barber is presumably heard on radio all over the world. What he says is true enough, but it deflates the comedy and ends the picture as a lecture, followed by a shot of Goddard outlined against the sky, joyously facing the Hynkel-free future, as the music swells. It didn't work then, and it doesn't work now. It is fatal when Chaplin drops his comic persona, abruptly changes the tone of the film, and leaves us wondering how long he is going to talk (a question that should never arise during a comedy). The movie plays like a comedy followed by an editorial.

Chaplin (1889-1977) nevertheless was determined to keep the speech; it might have been his reason for making the film. He put the Little Tramp and \$1.5 million of his own money on the line to ridicule Hitler (and was instrumental in directing more millions to Jewish refugee centers). He made his statement, it found a large audience, and in the stretches leading up to the final speech, he shows his innate comic genius. It is a funny film, which we expect from Chaplin, and a brave one. He never played a little man with a mustache again.

**Roger Ebert** *rogerebert.com*

*Made in 1940, when a sense of humor about the Nazis was still possible. Charles Chaplin plays two roles, Adenoid Hynkel, the dictator of Tomania, and a poor Jewish barber who's mistaken for Hynkel and sent to deliver a speech in his place. The final address, in which Chaplin pleads with the audience for sanity and world peace, has often been criticized for its length and sententiousness, but it is a remarkable piece of acting and verbal rhetoric (all the more so as this was the first time Chaplin had spoken in a film). Chaplin is at his most profound in suggesting that there is much of the Tramp in the Dictator, and much of the Dictator in the Tramp.*

**Dave Kehr** - *Chicago Reader*

The actor Chaplin is superb in the double role, often surpassing, and on a higher level, even the greatest of his earlier performances. As barber he plays many delightful scenes of the kind one expects from him. He absent-mindedly shaves his girl. Or he barbers a perplexed customer to the rhythm of a Hungarian dance by Brahms. The best scene of all is the one in which he and his comrades decide who shall be chosen to kill the dictator. They eat sweet puddings in one of which a coin is concealed. The man who finds the coin must sacrifice himself. The way they cheat each other over the dangerous dessert without becoming malicious is a delight to watch. The whole scene is perfectly composed, most delicately balanced, and rich in human understanding. The only trouble is that such perfect scenes as this are followed by more conventional passages which would be funny enough in an average picture but let one down in a film that deals so ambitiously with so great a theme.

The same criticism applies to the palace sequences. Outstanding here are the dictator's dance with the globe, the arrival of Napaloni, and the satire on the psychological approach, with both dictators trying to outsmart each other. Chaplin is really great, sharp and revealing, in all his speeches as dictator, which he renders in an invented language.

**Franz Hoellering**

