

When Čapek's play *The White Disease* premiered at the National Theatre in Prague, it received a 30 minute standing ovation from the audience at the end of the play. The audience interpreted it as an anti-Nazi play. But is it?

The Plot

- There's a pandemic of an infectious disease of incurable white spots, which cause people to rot alive in incredible pain, which only affects middle age people
- During a war-mongering dictatorship, Dr Galen will only give the cure out if the dictator stops the war
- The doctor only gives the antidote to the poor and refuses to give to the rich
- Only when the dictator develops the disease, does he call to end the war
- however the doctor dies on route as a result of a violent mob, leaving the dictator to die

Context¹

- Nazi Germany on the rise through 1930s
- 1935 - Masaryk resigned as President
- 1936 Hitler sent German troops into the Rhineland
- After the play the Munich agreement 1938 takes place
 - Neville Chamberlain tried peace talks with Hitler in which Czechoslovakian delegates were left in the hallway outside - Sudetenland with 3mil Germans as signed away to Germany

Anti - Nazi?

- The film was received as anti-Nazi for many reasons
- There's warmongering dictator letting people die, very representative of Hitler
- Non-Nazis may sympathize with Dr Galen who wants peace, and does his utmost to secure it
- In the film it shows mostly wealthy, middle aged people dying, this may represent the Nazi's living in Germany with full employment, meanwhile doctor helps the poor, those who may represent non-Germans
- The accountant at Baron Krog's may represent selfish nature of Nazis as his refusal to denounce his job to save his wife
- The film also shows how people's lives are in the hands of the few and if one nation wants war all have war
- And the dictator is left to die without his war
- People are put into camps with white disease - similar to concentration camps

Slide 4 - Karel Capek's preface²

- "One of the most distinctive features of post-war mankind is a retreat for humanity" shows how much ww1 affected him
- "The individual is dependent on an autocratic and imposed system" shows how apart of the system whether you want it or not
- Today in Europe battle of humanity and democracy vs supremacy and national and expansion where "human life only an instrument"
- "Ideals of democracy versus the unlimited and ambitious ideals of dictatorship" - part of conflict impulse for writing this

¹ ITV Documentary: Remember Czechoslovakia

² Karel Capek, Renata Flint, Robert Philmus., 'Preface to *Bila Nemoc*' Science Fiction Studies, 28th series, 1 (2001), pp. 1-6

- “The person who represents the will to power [the Marshall] will not be stopped by compassion for human pain and terror”
- “Human life will pay for this with pain” - both die at end

Anti-totalitarianism

- However, the play can be seen not merely just as anti-Nazi, but in ideological terms as anti-totalitarianism
- The white disease is a metaphor for a moral disease of totalitarianism
- Václav Havel said in ‘The Power of the Powerless’ that totalitarianism affects the whole of society, even those who don’t support it, even those who are against the totalitarian regime are still inevitably a part of it.³
- Most people do not have the courage to step out of the system, such as the accounting manager of Krüg’s works who refuses to give up his job unless Galen finds him the same job elsewhere, in - unable to leave the system
- Capek and Ian Hargreaves (British professor specializing in Nazism) both state that authoritarian regimes within themselves have seeds of their destructions - eventually they won’t be able to win all the wars
- Heim states “Capek’s vision is a universal one and his message of active resistance universally applicable”⁴ not just to nazim but to all totalitarianism
- Capek specifically states in his preface that the idea for the white disease, rather than cancer is so its fictitious and can be related to a regime of today but do an ideology⁵

Other points to note:

- Baron comments to the doctor “in your eyes he’s insane” - meaning people have different ideologies
- Apart of the regime, the Doctor, the good guy has to bribe the rich with his antidote to stop the war, he has to blackmail
- Secret police aggressively force him to dictator and the angry mob

previous works

- Previously Capek has wrote several works in defense of democracy during the 30s:
- His novel *The First Rescue Party*, 1937, pays homage to male solidarity -needed at a time of threat and war
- Čapek’s play *The Mother*, 1938 liked by communist critics as he’s finally seen in favour of military action and had abandoned his “relativism”.
- He was considered for the Nobel Peace Prize for literature in the 30s but didn't get it as his novel *the war with the newts* was thought to be too political.⁶
- *the Great Salamander*, is described similar to Hitler, and so the novel was considered anti-Nazi - “is a human being, a former corporal in the Great War”

A pacifist play?

³ Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central Eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1985)

⁴ Heim, Michael Henry, ‘The Plague Years’, *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, 7.7 (1998), 429-430

⁵ Karel Capek, Renata Flint, Robert Philmus., ‘Preface to *Bila Nemoc*’ *Science Fiction Studies*, 28th series, 1 (2001), pp. 1-6

⁶ *Válka s mloky*, Praha 1976

- Some may argue it is a pacifist play as Doctor Galen seeks absolute peace
- However there are many reasons to say why it is not:
- The play is about two conflicting forces: the doctors and the dictator
- The doctor with his moral vision is willing to sacrifice many to get what he wants
- In Copek's personal notes he wrote that Galen's blackmail is wrong
 - "It is an insoluble dilemma, no matter what he does, our doctor commits what is usually called tragic guilt (sic) and the author cannot defend him, he can only say that Galén will pay for his guilt by the ultimate catastrophe".⁷
- Fear is the doctor's ally, to get what he wants people must fear not having his antidote
- He even wastes ointment, pouring it onto the floor rather than giving it to the baron

The Doctor

- He believes he is doing the right thing for his moral cause, however he chooses who lives based on social class
- Doctor says you will kill people if you put me in prison and then demands to be arrested, rather than serve
- Dr. Galén says he is only and "ordinary man", but, there was also the "ordinariness" of the crowd who kills him, just because its ordinary doesn't make it morally right
- František Černý sees Galén as a fairy-tale hero, he embodies people's desire for peace, we sympathise with him yet his actions should be questioned as he uses blackmail.⁸

The Dictator

- War greatest thing can experience - with his military-industrial complex
- Doesn't care if people are dying, happy to let old die as he needs youth in his army
- Rather let his loyal friend die Baron Krog than give up war
- Believes he's invincible - shakes barons hand
- Humanised towards the end - lonely being a dictator, and turns afraid
 - some have complained this portrayal is too human and therefore old fashioned
 - but it could be true we do not know their private lives

Similarities between the Doctor and the Dictator

- They both believe they are carrying out the people's will and are both ideologically motivated
- They are both holding people's lives in their hands -the doctor lets rich die + dictator lets people die
- Both ruthless in actions
- Both end up dying as a result of their attempts to gain what they want through blackmail

Major Themes - Fear

- There are a few themes including:
- Corrupt intellectuals such as the professor
- Mindless violence - crowd kills Galen - big fear for Europe in 20s and 30s

Fear is central in the film

- Galen fears war and power

⁷ Karel Čapek, *Spisy*, vol. 19, p. 727, quoted in Pavel Janoušek, 'Čapkova poetika dramatu a "nepovedené" konce jeho her', in *Devětkrát o Karlu Čapkovi*, ed. Jiří Holý, p. 195

⁸ František Černý, *Čapkova Bílá nemoc*, in *Přednášky z 43. běhu Letní školy slovanských studií*, (Univerzita Karlova: Prague, 2000)

- Dictator fears dying
- Fear is Galen's ally he needs fear in order to get the Dictator to stop the war
- Fear is what an authoritarian regime fuels off - able to control through fear
- Context of the time, Czechoslovakia rife with fear of the Germans

Conclusion

- He's not being anti-fascist and anti-Nazi but anti-totalitarianism and the power and fear that comes with it
- His work is often one of philosophical contemplation, and through this play he shows conflicting ideologies
- The flaws of the doctor prove it isn't an outright film of a hero against the Nazi's but instead one of different ideologies
- His many works prove his anti-totalitarian nature
- Capek could not have known the reality of Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia however the looming fear of it was enough to be able to produce such a play