

# Paris Wasn't Burning: A Look at Why Not

"We'll always have Paris," Rick promised Ilsa at the end of "Casablanca," recalling a romantic idyll cruelly interrupted by the German occupation. In the

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**FILM  
REVIEW**

real world, in the late summer of 1944, as the Allied armies drew closer, the Nazis decided that if they could not have Paris, nobody else would, either. Hitler ordered the complete destruction of the city. Bridges and monuments — the Opera, the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre — were to be blown up; he hoped to leave tens of thousands dead amid the rubble and erase centuries of art, architecture and civilization.

The man charged with carrying out the demolition was Gen. Dietrich von Choltitz, the German military governor of Paris. That he disobeyed the Führer's orders is obvious enough, even to those who don't know the historical details. How and why he did so is the subject of "Diplomacy," a fascinating film directed by Volker Schlöndorff and based on Cyril Gely's play, in which General von Choltitz is portrayed by the great French actor Niels Arestrup, who originated the role onstage and who is joined by André Dussollier as Raoul Nordling, the Swedish ambassador to France.

The story of Nordling's contribution to saving Paris has been told on film before, in René Clément's "Is Paris Burning?" (1966), an artifact of the grand era of international co-production, which cast Orson Welles as the Scandinavian diplomat, and Gert Fröbe as the German general. Mr. Schlöndorff's film, though it offers a few scenic glimpses and an occasional burst of gunfire, presents a more concise narrative. It is a two-person chamber drama unfolding over a long, tense August night in a single enclosed space, von Choltitz's

suite at the Hotel Meurice.

The conversations depicted here, in which Nordling uses all of his diplomatic skills to persuade von Choltitz to spare the city they both love, never took place, though the film's timeline is otherwise accurate. It is, in any case, less a docudrama than an allegory, an attempt to distill the moral and psychological essence of a complex historical moment, and to illuminate that moment through the verbal interaction of two very different personalities.

Von Choltitz, a veteran of both world wars from an old German military family, is blunt and brutal. He is also exhausted and demoralized, suffering from terrible asthma and the realization that the cause he has served is on the verge of defeat.

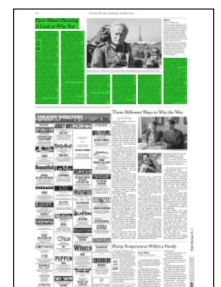
Mr. Arestrup, a broad-chested, brooding bull of a man — so terrifying and charismatic as the jailhouse kingpin in "A Prophet" — declines to portray the character as a mensch in monster's clothing. Von Choltitz may have good taste in food and art and an appealing sense of irony, but he is someone who has, without hesitation or compunction, supervised the massacre of Jews near the Eastern front and the leveling of cities less glamorous than Paris.

The general is a puzzle for the ambassador to solve. Mr. Dussollier, a fixture in the intellectually nimble work of Alain Resnais, is as elegant as Mr. Arestrup is rough, and his Nordling is a smooth and dapper gentleman whose impeccable manners disguise a gift for guile. Though he insists that he and his government are unwaveringly neutral, he is clearly in communication with the Resistance and has been spying on his interlocutor. He disarms the general with tales of bygone Parisian intrigue — they are in the very room where Napoleon

III kept one of his mistresses — and appeals, in turn, to his conscience, his vanity and his self-protective instincts.

Mr. Schlöndorff, who served his apprenticeship in France with Louis Malle and Jean-Pierre Melville before becoming one of the leading figures in the New German Cinema of the 1970s, turns the talkiness and the staginess of "Diplomacy" to the film's advantage. His precise, restless camera creates a feeling of claustrophobic suspense as the plot races against the clock toward what is, for the audience at least, a foregone conclusion. The real mystery lies not in the outcome but in von Choltitz's motive. Has Nordling tapped into a hidden spring of decency, or does von Choltitz, like so many Germans (including Hitler) harbor a sentimental affection for Paris? Does the general care more about the safety of his wife and children in Germany or about the status of his nation in postwar Europe?

You could say that the answers don't matter, insofar as Nordling's diplomacy was successful, and we still have Paris. But the value of "Diplomacy" is that it produces at least as much unsettlement as relief, compelling the viewer to remain haunted by nightmarish thoughts of what might have happened. Other cities were flattened, after all, and other populations were wiped out during World War II, which permanently collapsed the distance between the unthinkable and the actual. What seems unimaginable now was, a mere 70 years ago, not only imagined but also carefully planned and very nearly carried out.



Parigi non stava bruciando: cercare di capire perchè no