

in, determined and influenced, and in his public pronouncements. The result is masterful: a comprehensive and authoritative treatment of the period between the assassination of Caesar and the succession of Tiberius. The achievement of the book lies in its analysis of the ideas and structures of the dying republic and emerging principate. Bleicken is in his element here. During his career, which this book crowned when it first appeared in German in 1998 (he died in 2005), he wrote extensively on constitutional topics, and it is for this that he is probably best known. Scholarship published since has improved our understanding of aspects of the period, but it has nuanced rather than challenged Bleicken's overall view. It is to Allen Lane's credit that they have brought this work to the wider audience it deserves in a clear translation by Anthea Bell. Bleicken's Germanic prose style cannot be recommended as light reading. Those who wish to understand the principate of Augustus, however, will be rewarded with a breathtaking panorama of Roman politics at a crucial turning point in history.

Bleicken treats the young Augustus in a manner appropriate to his stature among a gallery of Roman aristocrats asserting themselves in the aftermath of Caesar's death. He cuts a modest figure in the first two hundred pages or so. After Actium, Bleicken focuses on matters relevant to the exercise and maintenance of Augustus's rule. The peace he restored revealed what the civil war had obscured: that the Roman army was a permanent prop of the new monarchy. Bleicken argues that it offered a means for expansion which was not initially planned but 'pre-decided' by security concerns in the north, which engendered wars that he studies in detail. Augustus's exposure of young family members to the troops preserved the direct contact between the ruling house and an army with which it was 'locked in an indissoluble relationship'. In Rome, meanwhile, Augustus pursued social policies that were to provide the moral foundations for his new society. As he aged he became increasingly concerned with the manipulation of male and female family relatives in his quest for a lasting dynasty: it was another sign

of monarchical tendencies that he seems to have been obsessed with succession by blood. Amid the analysis of events, ideas and structures, there are flashes of wit and superbly penned summary evaluations of important players, such as Augustus's right-hand man, Agrippa.

'There are reports of a correctly dressed lecturer in a German university lecture hall, when the death of Alexander was about to be announced, shedding a tear of emotion as the last soulful word died away in his throat. No one has ever been known to show grief or even melancholy over the account of the death of Augustus.' Augustus, Bleicken points out, is not a man to inspire liking, as Alexander and Caesar have always done. Both were undoubt-

edly greater generals than Augustus, who lacked charisma and brilliance. But they were also destroyers. Augustus stands apart in his achievement, unique in antiquity in its scale, as a political architect. He halted the decline of Rome and created a new political system that brought stability for two centuries and underpinned the structures of the later Roman Empire. Alexander, according to Plutarch, did not know what to do after his conquests were complete. It is little wonder that, on learning this, Augustus expressed surprise that Alexander did not judge it a greater task to set in order the empire he had won than to win it.

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LARA FEIGEL

## Lili & Leni

Dietrich & Riefenstahl: Hollywood, Berlin, and a Century in Two Lives

By Karin Wieland

(Translated by Shelley Frisch)

(Liveright 573pp £22.99)

In 1929, Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl competed for the role of Lola Lola in Josef von Sternberg's film *The Blue Angel*. According to Riefenstahl, von Sternberg was in love with her at the time but was seduced by Dietrich's 'vulgar and suggestive' charm. According to Dietrich, von Sternberg barely knew Riefenstahl and was instantly captivated by her own appealing blend of diffidence and defiance, seeing a beautiful woman awaiting only a brilliant man to turn her into a star.

It's impossible to know the truth about this moment, as both women endlessly reinvented their own pasts. What we do know is that the part of Lola Lola brought Dietrich instant fame and initiated a creative and sexual partnership with von Sternberg that quickly dominated both their lives. Dietrich's success was all the more troubling for Riefenstahl because of their proximity: they lived on the same block and she could see into Dietrich's windows from her roof garden. With von Sternberg out of her reach, she turned her attention to an even more powerful

admirer. It was only two years later that she began the collaboration with Adolf Hitler that would bring her fame and infamy for the next seventy years.

The parallels between Dietrich and Riefenstahl are so numerous it seems strange that a joint biography has not been written before. Both defied their parents to appear on stage and landed early roles more as a result of determination than talent. Dietrich dashed around Berlin as an extra, appearing in several plays each night. Riefenstahl secretly learned the lead role in a dance performance and so was ready to step in when the dancer was ill. Both women learned to box and to use sex as a source of power, though neither seems especially to have enjoyed the physical aspect of their affairs. Their promiscuity was risky. At one stage the director, lead actor and producer of a film Riefenstahl was making were all in love with her.

In telling their stories, Karin Wieland has decided to juxtapose their lives without making the comparisons explicit. This can be very effective: she is an evocative

scene setter and so it is easy to grasp the implication that both women were created by their time and place. They were New Women, resourceful and energetic, emerging out of the ruins of the First World War, where only the toughest could survive.

Berlin in the 1920s created a climate in which the two performers made a virtue out of a somewhat pathological willingness to subject themselves to pain for the sake of their art. Riefenstahl acted in a series of mountain films for the director Arnold Fanck, who took as much pleasure in hoisting her up an ice wall, where she was subjected to torrents of ice and snow, as she did in being hoisted up it. 'I love the mountains,' she announced at this time, in language that makes it easy to see the appeal of Nazism to her. 'I see them as symbols of struggle: the danger, the resistance of the summits.'

Making *The Scarlet Empress* with von Sternberg, Dietrich had to ring a huge cathedral bell while a crucifix rimmed in steel slammed against her inner thighs. On von Sternberg's instructions, she repeated the eight strokes fifty times without flinching and then went calmly to her dressing room to mop up the blood. Entertaining American soldiers during the Second World War, she slept on the floor of a roofless, bombed-out house, making no complaint about the cold, rain and rats, and enjoying her chance to struggle in the face of danger.

When it comes to their activities in the Second World War, I would have liked Wieland to address the parallels between the two women more explicitly. Reading their stories together, it starts to seem almost a matter of chance which of them becomes a fanatical supporter of Hitler and which becomes a committed anti-fascist. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Dietrich was living in Hollywood because von Sternberg had moved there, not because of political situation. Indeed, in 1932 Dietrich had expressed a desperation to return to Germany that amazed her friends at home. When she went to war as an entertainer on the American side, it was initially because it brought a chance to follow her lover Jean Gabin to Europe, though she quickly became a passionate proponent of the Allies' cause.



*Riefenstahl: shooting from the hip*

Similarly, before meeting Hitler, Riefenstahl had found it easy to share the views of the Jewish socialist filmmaker Béla Balázs, with whom she briefly collaborated. When she changed her opinions overnight, it was both because she was seduced by Hitler's personal charisma and because she found in the Nazi movement the ideal subject matter and backer for her filmmaking.

This is not simply a question of pragmatism. It seems more complex, and this is where Wieland might have provided greater analysis. Both Dietrich and Riefenstahl were drawn along by sentiment, easily deluding themselves as well as those around them. Both could commit genuinely and idealistically to an extreme idea if it appealed to their sense of beauty. It is hard to reconcile the striking generosity of the two women with their reckless callousness when it came to former lovers and friends – and, in Riefenstahl's case, when it came to using extras from concentration camps in *Tiefland*, the film she started to make during the war. Reconciling such contradictions becomes easier if we analyse the two women together, seeing how their shared characteristics could manifest themselves in different environments.

However, the lack of direct comparison is a strength at the end of the book, when the two women's final years are juxtaposed. This is a moment for showing and not telling; Wieland (by way of her excellent translator, Shelley Frisch) paints a moving portrait of two women

facing up to the costs and limits of determined self-creation. For Dietrich, sustaining her image once age and illness set in proved too great a task. Hidden away in her Paris apartment, determined that no one should see the ruin of her famous face, she closed the thick curtains and drank away her final years alone. Eventually, she had spent all her money and the city of Paris ended up paying her rent to save her from being turned out onto the street.

By contrast, Riefenstahl's iron will remained. In her nineties, she trained as a diver and became a pioneer of underwater filming, seeking out sharks. Aged 100, she decided to film in Sudan, despite the fact that a civil war was raging around her. She survived gunfire and a helicopter crash, which she demanded should be restaged so that she had a chance to capture it on film. The centenarian Riefenstahl is a mad and astonishing figure. At this stage it becomes easy to admire her recklessness and to share her triumph that her gambles have paid off.

Reading the final chapter of the book and watching as Dietrich dies in the dark aged 90 and Riefenstahl quietly expires aged 101, it feels as though not only they but also their troubled, brilliant century is finally passing away. Both Riefenstahl and Dietrich outlived the era that created them – and took it with them when they died.

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