

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Germany, Year Zero (*Germania anno zero*) 1947

Roberto Rossellini

### OVERVIEW

*Germany, Year Zero* is the last instalment in Rossellini's well-known 'war trilogy.' Unlike the first two films, it is set in Berlin, the conquered capital of Germany in the year 1947. Like the rest of the trilogy, it dramatizes the effects of war and its aftermath of poverty on ordinary people. The title, which is taken from a book by a French sociologist (Edgar Morin), suggests that the city and the country have been flattened and must be built back, from the ground up. Certainly, the film depicts a city and a family hollowed out by war and its consequences, both psychological and physical. It ends with the horrific death of its hero, by suicide. Avoiding any outright denunciation of Nazism and Germany, the film includes both pro- and anti-fascists in its wide spectrum of characters, while concentrating on the experiences of Edmund and other young people. Rossellini dedicated the film to the memory of his own son, who had died a year before the film was made, at age nine, during surgery to remove his appendix. The film, lauded for its impeccable authenticity, won Best Director for Rossellini and Best Screenplay at the Locarno Film Festival.

### SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Edmund suffers with his family in post-war Berlin. His father is ill and his sister gets cigarettes from the Yanks, but his older brother, Karl-Heinz, hides from the Allied occupiers because of his war record, which means that he isn't registered for a ration card and can't get work. Edmund is too young to get a work permit and has to earn what he can on the black-market, where he is tutored by Jo, a slightly older boy. When Edmund's father comes back from hospital and says he wants to die in order to lessen the burden on his family, Edmund takes him at his word and poisons him. Overwhelmed by guilt and abandoned by others, Edmund takes his own life.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Edmund	Edmund is a young, motherless boy in Berlin.
Eva	Eva is his older sister.
Karl-Heinz	Karl-Heinz is his older brother.
Kohler	Mr Kohler is his ailing father.
Rudemacher	Mr Rudemacher owns the building in which the Kohler family has been housed.
Henning	Mr Henning is Edmund's old teacher.
Jo	Jo is the leader of a gang of young thieves.
Christl	Christl is a young girl in the gang.

### STORY

*Edmund* Germany has been defeated and heavily-damaged Berlin is occupied by the Allies. With bombed-out buildings all around, a group of German civilians are digging graves for the dead. It is hard work, but at least they are paid something. When thirteen-year-old Edmund is discovered to be too young and without a work permit, he is chased off and walks home. People jostle with each other to cut pieces of flesh off a dead horse. Edmund picks up a few pieces of coal that fall from a trunk and runs away.

*Troubles at home* Edmund, his father, older brother and older sister have been housed in a building against the will of the owner, Mr Rademacher, who is concerned about the utility bills. The gas metre man demands extra money when the building uses more than its allotted amount, and Rademacher complains that Edmund's family is using too much power (hot water bottles, etc) to look after their ailing father, Mr Kohler. The family's financial situation is perilous.

*Karl-Heinz* The older son, Karl-Heinz, is hiding from the authorities because he refused to renounce Nazism and might be arrested. He hasn't even registered to get a ration card. Edmund promises that he and his older sister, Eva, will earn money. When Eva confronts Karl-Heinz and urges him to find

work, he says he suffered in the war and can't face the authorities. She gets cigarettes by flirting with Allied soldiers and sells them for a few marks. But it's not enough for a family of four.

*Scams* Edmund asks Rademacher if there is any work he can do and is given a scale to sell. When he hears Rademacher accuse Eva of loose morals, Edmund pleads with her not to 'go out.' Then we see her, all dressed up, in a nightclub with a French man and other smart couples. Next day, she joins a long queue for rations and complains about rising prices. A friend tells her she should forget her boyfriend, who is a POW, and make some real money by going into prostitution.

*Mr Henning* Edmund is cheated by a rich man, who takes the scale and only gives him two tins of food in return. Idle on the street, Edmund is greeted by Mr Henning, who used to be his teacher. Like Karl-Heinz, Henning was a committed Nazi and now can't get work. He takes Edmund to his apartment in a grand but now-ruined building, where it's clear that he has sexual designs on the boy. He gives him a recording of a Hitler speech and a record-player. Guided by Jo, one of Henning's young accomplices, Edmund goes to the ruins of Hitler's bunker, where he sells the record to some Americans and gets 200 marks. Henning gives him 10 for a commission.

*Desperate measures* Jo and his young gang initiate Edmund into the world of petty crime, selling goods on the black market, stealing and cheating. He gives Edmund some stolen potatoes and leaves him in the company of Christl, a young girl who sleeps with the gang. Edmund is scolded by his father and brother for staying out all night, and by Rademacher for only getting a few cans of food for the scale. 'We're all starving to death...it would be good if your father just died,' Rademacher says. Next, Rademacher arranges for someone to cut off the gas supply to the Kohlers' rooms.

*Mr Kohler* When Mr Kohler's illness worsens, a doctor diagnoses his condition as malnourishment and gets him into a hospital, where he eats well. But Eva knows that he will be back soon and they have no food. Again, she scolds Karl-Heinz for not working, and he insults her for 'dancing with your Yanks.' Edmund seeks out Henning and explains their desperate situation. Henning says that the weak die so that the strong survive and there's nothing anyone can do. Edmund visits his father in hospital, which cheers the old man. Saying he's a burden on the family, the father admits that he would have committed suicide but lacked the courage. Listening to him, Edmund pockets a bottle of poison from his bedside table.

*Poison and police* Brought back home, Mr Kohler sees that the family has almost no food and prays for his death. He then reflects on Hitler and the war, saying 'we saw disaster coming and we did nothing to prevent it...Now we have to acknowledge our guilt.' He urges Karl-Heinz to register and save the family. Listening to this, Edmund puts poison in a cup of tea and serves it to his father. As he drinks the poison, the police raid the building and take Karl-Heinz away. Karl-Heinz is released by the police and comes home to the sad news of his father's death. Everyone assumes the cause was starvation.

*Alone* While his siblings move in with friends, Edmund stays in the old rooms by himself. Disturbed by what he's done, he wanders about the city. He finds Jo and his gang, and tries to pull Christl out of their grasp, but she dismisses him as a 'baby'. Feeling isolated, he climbs the stairs to the apartment but turns away at the last moment. When he accuses Henning of persuading him to kill his father, the older man is horrified and calls him a 'little monster.' Escaping from his arms, Edmund runs onto the street and wanders at random. He tries to join a bunch of kids playing football but they don't accept him. He hears an organ playing from a bombed-out church and climbs to the top of another half-ruined building. High up, he looks across the street at the building where his family lived.

*Final solution* He mimes shooting himself with a toy gun. Then he watches a van pull up in front of his family's building. His father's coffin is carried out and put in the hearse. His sister and brother appear on the street, dressed for the funeral, and wonder where Edmund is. When he doesn't come, they walk away. Edmund stares at the building and jumps to his death.

## THEMES

1. *Guilt* The theme that underlies this multi-character and event-filled film is that of guilt. Virtually every character feels guilty at one point or another. Edmund's father, for example, indulges in a long monologue about how he is burdening his family. Having just come back from hospital, where he ate well, the old man is lying in bed at home, where he is just another mouth to feed. He begs god to end his life and lessen the load carried by his family. Listening to his speech, Karl-Heinz can only weep when the father tells him to register, get work and help the family. But Karl-Heinz is a coward, a soldier who served in the war and now has lost the courage to live. When talking with Eva, the daughter, Karl-Heinz says he, too, is suffering from the guilt of not doing his part for the family. Eva also wishes she could do more than earn a few cigarettes by flirting, but she would feel terrible if she took to prostitution and cheated on her fiancé, who is a POW. Then comes Edmund's guilt. He thought he was doing the right thing by poisoning his father. After all, the old man had asked for death and Mr Henning, his teacher, had said that people must have courage to let the weak die. After serving his father the poisoned tea, Edmund walks away into the dark shadows. When the three siblings gather around the corpse, Edmund hangs his head. 'Is he free now?' he asks, in hope. And when he explains to Henning what he's done, his teacher blames him for acting immorally. Poor Edmund is now guilt-stricken and cannot relieve himself of that feeling by confessing his terrible crime to anyone. He is haunted and rids himself of guilt only by suicide. Edmund's story is representative of Germany's story, a country racked by poverty and suffering, but above all by a collective sense of guilt for participation in or condoning of Hitler's barbaric regime. That psychological scar will remain for decades after the physical healing is completed.

2. *War* That physical suffering is real enough, however, and pervades the film. After his first two films in the war trilogy (*Rome Open City* and *Paisan*) showed the effects of war on Italian society, Rossellini turned his attention to Germany, and to Berlin, which he visited in late summer 1947 and shot most of the scenes. Consider the first scene, which opens with a high overhead shot of a cemetery and then focuses on old women and children digging graves. Grave digging was not a bad job to have after the war, when there were still a lot of bodies to bury. Little Edmund is shooed off because he's too young, but the final shot in the film shows his own dead body, which someone will have to bury. In between that beginning and end, we see a city devastated by war, by bombs, by poverty and by starvation. People rip flesh off a dead horse, young women turn to prostitution, young girls sleep with young boys, young boys become petty criminals, rich men cheat little boys and the whole town seems to be caught up in a web of illicit transactions. Time and time again, the lack of food is mentioned. Edmund's father's illness is diagnosed as lack of nutrition, and he is ecstatic when describing the good food at the hospital, with 'real milk.' Edmund is proud to come home with a handful of stolen potatoes. Tinned meat, probably bought on the black market, is deemed the equivalent of 300 marks. In addition to starvation, society is corrupt. Even the upright Mr Rademacher doesn't hesitate to cut off the Kohlers' gas supply. Teachers, like Mr Henning, turn out to be sexual predators in disguise. The suffering of people in Berlin in the period after the war is well documented by historical research, and this film provides a dramatic illustration of their tragedy.

3. *Childhood* Both guilt and poverty are major factors that contribute to the loss of childhood innocence, as seen in the story of Edmund and other youngsters in the film. Aged about thirteen, Edmund is both a child and a young adult. In post-war Berlin, though, he is thrust into adult roles much too early, while still clinging to his boyish pursuits. With his father ill and his brother in hiding, little Edmund must contribute to the family finances, which he does by lying about his age to work as a grave-digger, by trying to sell a scale and a record (of Hitler's speech) on the black market and by learning the tricks of the trade from Jo, a slightly older and much more corrupted boy. Edmund has no idea what Christl is doing with Jo and his gang, not until he hears accusations about his own sister's immoral behaviour. His young eyes opened, he goes back to the gang and tries to 'rescue' Christl, but she pushes him away and calls him a 'baby.' That scene illustrates his transitional status: he knows that sex is not right for Christl, but he is too young to understand or do anything about it. He himself is the sexual target of Henning but only seems to grasp that the man's interest is wrong. Similarly, he hears that his father wants to die and his teacher says something that seems to justify poisoning his father, but he is mortified when the act is done. He is simply too young to have undertaken such a task. Even at the end, before his suicide, we see that Edmund is still a boy. He wants to play football, he makes an attempt at hopscotch and he plays with a toy gun. When he falls from the building, it is the culmination of a story of a boy thrust too early into the role of a man.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Edmund** *[open]* Edmund, the young boy in the Kohler family, is a sweet child with the face of a troubled adult. He is the emotional centre of the story, although his motives and feelings are often vague. At times, he seems lost, like the city and the country he lives in. His loss of innocence is emblematic of a wider collapse, and even corruption, of the society around him.

**Compromised** From his first appearance, we see that Edmund is torn between youth and adulthood. The scene is a cemetery, where a group of people are digging graves. When one of men complains that Edmund is 'not pulling his weight,' the suited supervisor asks him how old he is. 'Fifteen years,' Edmund lies, bold as brass. Other workers challenge him, saying he's too young and doesn't have a work permit. Hounded out, Edmund drops his shovel and runs away. This brief scene illustrates his dilemma: he needs to be an adult to have a work permit and earn some money, but he is still a kid. Even at thirteen years old, he is forced to cheat and lie in order to help his family. Like so many people in post-war Berlin, he is compromised.

**Naïve** Thrust into the world of adults, Edmund is too naïve to navigate successfully through its complexities. That problem is illustrated by an even briefer scene on the street. Edmund has been given a scale by Mr Rudemacher to sell for about 300 marks. Standing on a street corner, he is approached by a well-dressed man who asks about the scale. Then the stranger scoffs at the price Edmund wants for a 'rust bucket', picks it up and gestures to his driver to approach. He reaches inside the car and pulls out a tin of meat. 'I'll give you this for it,' he says. 'Top quality.' When Edmund complains that the scale is worth more, the generous gentlemen quiets him by tossing in another tin. Edmund protests, but the man shuts him up and rides off in the car. An onlooker calls Edmund an idiot, though naïve would be more accurate.

**Confused** The most important event for Edmund's character is his poisoning of his father. It begins when he visits his father in hospital. While his father says he wishes he were dead (to help the family), Edmund sees a bottle of poison, creases his brow and then pockets it. In the next scene, his father is at home and continues to express his wish to die and relieve the family burden. As he continues to speak about courage and duty, we see Edmund in the background. He's at the stove, heating water. When his father starts to talk about his experiences in the First War, he moves into the pantry, mixes the poison and the tea leaves in an infuser, puts the infuser into a cup and pours in hot water. When he gives the tea to his father, he watches him drink with a bowed head and pursed lips. His father says he's 'such a good boy' and reaches up to pat his cheek, but Edmund pulls away. Through most of the scene, Edmund is in the background, silent but purposeful. Except for his face, which is half in shadow, we don't know what he's thinking. He knows what he's doing, but his reasons appear blurred in his mind.

**Disturbed** After his father dies, and his brother is taken away by the police, Edmund's world has collapsed. The entire final fifteen minutes of the film show him lonely and disturbed. In deep shadows at night, he steps over the rubble of a ruined building and plays a half-hearted game of hopscotch. He passes a prostitute saying goodnight to her client; he visits Jo's gang and is turned away by Christl. He is also abandoned by Mr Henning and by a group of boys playing football. He walks down a deserted street, all alone, with bombed-out buildings looming on both sides. The material desolation symbolises his inner state. He hears church music, climbs to the top of a building, sees his father's coffin and lets himself drop to his death. His mental instability is never expressed in words, which makes it all the more powerful.

**Karl-Heinz** Karl-Heinz, the older brother in the family, is a character of weakness and self-pity. He suffered terribly during the war, in which he fought to the end, making him a target for the Allied authorities. He dare not register for a ration card or work permit for fear that they will imprison him. And so, he hides at home while his family half starves. He is called a coward by his sister and by his father, and only at the very end, when it is too late, does he show any courage.

**Self-pitying** Karl-Heinz's self-pity seeps out from his haunted face. One good example is a scene when he talks with Edmund. The younger brother says that Karl-Heinz should have someone to look after him. 'Me?' he snorts, 'I don't need anyone. I've had enough of this rotten life!' Edmund says he shouldn't lose courage, to which he again gives a sneering reply. 'No, I mustn't. A soldier can lose everything, but not his courage. But I'm no longer a soldier. I'm a nobody. Just one more mouth to feed. I'd like to jump out of the window.' That is Karl-Heinz in a nutshell. He is eaten up by self-hate. The war's over and he's a burden on his family. He doesn't even have the will power to live.

**Spiteful** Deeply unhappy, Karl-Heinz turns his frustration into attacks on others. This quality is illustrated in a conversation with his sister, Eva. When the family's situation deteriorates after their power is cut off, Karl-Heinz denounces Mr Rademacher. Eva says she asked an allied officer about getting Karl-Heinz a ration card without registering. But rather than appreciate her help, he insults her. 'The allied officers guide your morals,' he says, referring to her friendship with them. When she urges him to get work, he again attacks her and says, 'Leave me alone. Go dancing with your Yanks.' His spite is unjustified (Eva does nothing more than flirt with the allied officers), but Karl-Heinz enjoys spewing out his bile.

**Guilt-ridden** The problem for Karl-Heinz is not that he lacks a conscience; the problem is that he lacks courage and is burdened with guilt as a result. That guilt is evident throughout the story, but it is explicit in a scene at home, when Eva is serving food to the family. Karl-Heinz breaks down and weeps while listening to his father lay out some home-truths. Karl-Heinz, the father says, has shirked his responsibility by not registering. Suppose I died, he says to his older son, 'What then? Would you leave your little sister and brother to face their fates alone?' Karl-Heinz says he would not, but then his father tells him to prove that he is a man and register. Listening to all this, which is undeniable, Karl-Heinz lays his head on the table and cries. And he stays in that position while his father goes on to describe how Edmund and Eva would be grateful and he would be proud if he went to work. But that is just the problem. Karl-Heinz lacks courage and the old man's speech only pours more guilt on his bowed head.

**Eva** Pretty and young, Eva is the rock of the family. She has a boyfriend still held as a POW; her father is dying; her older brother is a coward; and Edmund is too young to help the family out of poverty. She is the one with fortitude, who stands in the ration queues and manages to put a little food on the table. In the absence of a mother, she takes on the maternal role, scolding her brothers and keeping house. Without her, we feel, the family would have fallen apart sooner than it does.

**Outspoken** Eva is kind but does not hesitate to speak the truth when it is necessary. That quality is dramatized in a scene between her and Karl-Heinz. Leading him into a private room, so they don't argue in front of their father, she accuses him of being a 'coward' for not registering and getting a work permit. 'And you're terribly selfish,' she adds for good measure. Then she accuses him of indifference to her own suffering. 'You don't care where I go out at night, as long as I bring home cigarettes,' she says. Then she lowers the boom. 'Do you want me to become a whore for you?' she asks. She quickly apologises, but we appreciate that she has spoken candidly, trying to get her brother to face the truth.

**Loyal** Eva is loyal not only to her family but also to Helmet, her sweetheart (and possible fiancé), who is still a POW. She befriends the Americans but only in order to get cigarettes to sell in order to make a little cash. Her steadfastness is revealed in a scene, where she and a girlfriend are standing in a rations queue. When Eva complains about the high prices and lack of money, her friend chides her for only getting cigarettes from the Americans. Eva says she doesn't want to go any further with the Americans (i.e., prostitution) because of Helmet. Her friend suggests that he would understand the situation, but Eva explains that Helmet is all alone. 'He has only one thing to hold on to,' she says, 'and that is me.' She shakes her head and says she lacks the courage to do anything more to get money. But it is not a lack of courage. It is her loyalty to Helmet and to her own dignity that prevents her from becoming a prostitute.

**Resolute** Eva is the strongest of all the characters in the story, a quality that she displays time and time again, but particularly in one scene. The family are about to sit down to dinner as their bed-ridden father says he wants to die. Eva, who has been listening while she peels potatoes, puts down the knife and turns to face him. 'Don't talk like that, father,' she says softly. But he rambles on about what a relief his death will be to his family and to him. 'We'll get through it,' she says and returns to peeling the potatoes. It's not clear if she believes her own words, but she puts up a good front in order to bolster her own hopes and those of her family. Her determination to survive is unwavering.



(Edmund wandering among the ruins)



(Mr Henning and Edmund)



(The family helping their father, Mr Kohler)



(Eva scolds her brother, Karl-Heinz)



(Edmund gives his father the fatal cup of tea)