

A woman in war

Charlotte Gray, directed by Gillian Armstrong

By Joanne Laurier
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Charlotte Gray, directed by Gillian Armstrong, written by Jeremy Brock, based on the novel by Sebastian Faulks

Charlotte Gray is a World War II melodrama directed by veteran Australian filmmaker Gillian Armstrong (*Oscar and Lucinda*, 1997; *Little Women*, 1994; *My Brilliant Career*, 1979). Based on the 1999 bestselling novel by Sebastian Faulks, the movie is set in southern France. During the war northern and northeastern France were directly controlled by the Nazis, while in the rest of the country a pro-fascist, collaborationist regime in Vichy, headed by Marshal Henri Philippe Pétain, held sway.

In Armstrong's film, a young Scottish woman, Charlotte Gray (Cate Blanchett), is on her way to London in 1942 during the blitz. On a train a member of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) notices Charlotte reading Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* in the original French and invites her to a book-publishing party in London. At the party she meets and falls for a battle-weary Royal Air Force pilot named Peter Gregory, who is ambivalent about his role in the war. Charlotte, fiercely patriotic, is recruited for service in the SOE. When Gregory is shot down over France, Charlotte becomes an undercover courier whose desire to fight with the French Resistance is driven primarily by the hope of finding her new lover.

Although Charlotte considers herself to be apolitical, she feels the need to fight against the Nazis. "It all seemed so simple—we would triumph over the Nazis ... even a lie is less unthinkable than what is happening." She is assigned to serve with a cadre of British agents supporting the anti-fascist partisans. Gray is parachuted into a field near Lezignac, a provincial village targeted for attack by the Nazis, and assumes a false identity.

She hooks up with the leader of the local resistance movement, Communist Party member Julien Levade (Billy Crudup), and is sent to care for two Jewish boys being sheltered at his father's crumbling estate. Believing her pilot to be dead, Charlotte falls in love with the ardent and committed Julien.

The German military easily wipes out Lezignac's Resistance fighters; Julien's father and the two young boys end up being sent to a concentration camp. In the fight against these atrocities, Charlotte discovers herself to be a strong, heroic woman. With the end of the war in 1945, Charlotte is again in London and the pilot Peter Gregory is alive. But Charlotte chooses dedication to the ideals for which she has presumably been fighting over political ambivalence ("Staying alive is not good enough ... there must be something to set against all this.") She returns to Lezignac and

finds Julien.

In the Faulks novel, the struggle against the barbarism of Nazism proceeds, in the words of one reviewer, as a "strangling longing for physical and spiritual release." At the novel's end, Faulks has Charlotte ruminating about the power of feelings and "their promise of transcendence. People followed them and believed in them because they offered not only a paradise of sensation but the promise of meaning, too, like the miracle of art, they held out an explanation of all the other faltering lights by which people were more momentarily guided."

The film's view of the war, to the extent that it makes itself felt, is at best simplistic. Its unstated but underlying assumption is that the Allies defeated Nazis Germany single-handedly, although the British SOE is not portrayed sympathetically. In reality, by June 1944 Hitler's forces had already suffered serious blows at the hands of the Soviet Red Army, first, outside Stalingrad in January 1943 and second, in the massive tank battle at Kursk in July of that year. The Soviet population, despite the crimes and blunders of the Stalin bureaucracy, played a critical role in defeating Nazism. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that one of the factors motivating the Allied preparations for an invasion of northern France in 1944 was the fear that the Red Army would roll across eastern Europe and occupy all of Germany.

The film has creditable moments. One of the scenes with the most depth and dimension is the interrogation of Julien's father by Nazi officers and the collaborating locals. The newly arrived occupiers are enforcing the policy of "Aryanization" and have to fulfill certain quotas. Levade, Julien's father, is one-eighth Jewish. The scene is dramatically compelling because of the agonizing choice ultimately forced upon Julien: to sacrifice either his father or the Jewish children he is protecting. It is also significant that Charlotte did not dominate the scene. The moment was chilling—certain truths were allowed to emerge. In fact, French government officials deported some 75,000 Jews, including 12,000 children, to concentration camps between 1941 and 1944, where they were murdered.

Without entering too far into the "thank heaven for small mercies" department, the fact that the filmmakers kept Julien a Communist Party member must be considered at least a minor show of courage in this day and age. This may not seem like much (and indeed it is not), but it should be recalled that the makers of *Chocolat* (2000) felt compelled to change the "villain" of the novel on which that film was based from a priest to a mayor,

presumably in part out of a fear of incurring the wrath of the Catholic Church.

Resistance fighters are represented in *Charlotte Gray* by a small group led by the avowed Communist, Julien. It was the belief of those who supported the Vichy regime that the collaborationist government and the Nazis occupiers represented a bulwark against Bolshevism. The film, however, never really defines the character or the role of the Communist Party beyond depicting the activities of a few saboteurs.

Faulks's novel gives a somewhat clearer accounting of Julien's political views: "The Communist party was banned, since, through its connection with Russia, it theoretically supported the Allies. Julien had attended a secret meeting in Limoges, where they talked of sabotage and armed resistance, but he felt uneasy about the Communist plans for France, their enthusiasm for Stalin and the most particularly for the way they had, a few years earlier, helped derail the Popular Front, the one government for which he had felt enthusiasm."

In fact, it was the Popular Front policy, adopted in 1935 by the Stalinist Communist International, which tied the hands of the working class—in Spain and in France with the most catastrophic consequences—by subordinating it to the various bourgeois political parties. The Communist Party of France (PCF) supported the Popular Front government that came to power in 1936 and sought to undermine the mass actions taken by the French working class in June/July 1936 and then in November 1938. In opposing the political independence of the working class from the reformist Socialist and bourgeois Radical Parties, the Stalinists did enormous political damage at a time when sections of the French bourgeoisie were making overtures to the Nazis.

Following the signing of the infamous Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939, Communist parties around the world, including the PCF, were instructed to oppose any war waged against Germany. This helped insure that when Hitler's troops took control of France in 1940 there was no organized resistance by the working class.

The PCF, outlawed in 1939, opposed the Resistance until June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. The party then directed its forces to join the Resistance. After the collapse of the German occupation, the French Stalinists helped hoist DeGaulle into power and then contained and disbanded the Resistance. In exchange, PCF members were given leading ministerial positions in DeGaulle's first postwar government.

Armstrong's film touches upon critical events of the past century. She comes to these events, however, with all the baggage that the contemporary artist or intellectual almost invariably carries with him or her: a certain laziness, a general lack of deep historical insight, vaguely liberal or "left" ideas, but the kind of "leftism" identified with feminism and similar middle class trends.

The movie adopts something of the novel's tone and some of its concerns, but, in general, is somewhat less substantial or convincing. It seems to suggest that although the story of the Nazis and their collaborators is a cautionary tale for today's world, the spiritual journey ("finding oneself") is what's most important. "War makes us into people we didn't know we were," says Gregory before his ill-fated flight. Little is shown, in the movie, of what constitutes that change. As the men are dropping like flies,

however, Charlotte emerges as the enduring lone crusader. Peter has been shot down, Julien and the Communist Resistance fighters are easily rendered ineffective, British intelligence proves to be corrupt and impotent, but the strong female, made aware of her powers, can confront challenges of world-historic dimension. This perspective, despite competent direction and cinematography, hampers the film, which conveys little sense of the sweep of events. Big historic episodes are subordinated to the personal awakening of the female protagonist.

The relative light-mindedness with which the film deals with the events in question finds its artistic corollary in a plot with serious lapses in believability. The drama has simply not been thought through. (In the novel these narrative elements are more thoroughly prepared and grounded.) No explanation is really given as to why Charlotte is chosen by the SOE for such a dangerous mission involving so many lives. Despite language skills, her political rawness would—and, in fact, does—make her a liability at the front. Also, her motive for espionage seems a trifle slight; after all, she parachutes into a country overrun by fascists to find a lover she has known for only *a few hours*. A deep connection between the two, capable of eliciting such a response, would have to be proven dramatically.

There are many other anomalies and failures in logic, some petty, others more significant. Julien, an important Resistance fighter, who must remain unknown to the enemy, publicly shouts curses at the Nazis troops arriving in Lezignac. It is a ridiculous scene, made even more ridiculous when the heroine plants a kiss on his lips to shut him up—love blooms as the tanks go rolling by.

Equal in weight to the screenplay's carelessness is the general lack of tension in the drama. *Charlotte Gray* suffers from an atmospheric dullness. The viewer does not feel what he or she should feel, considering the events unfolding. We are watching the Nazis take over a town and dispatch some of its residents to concentration camps. Yet the film never conveys the real horror or explores the dark recesses of such a moment. A neutral tone persists and the impact is largely lost.

Too much of the film's energy is spent on recording Charlotte's actions and registering her reactions, leading towards a predictable transformation in which great events play a subordinate role. One can't help but feel that on the director's intellectual and artistic scales, resistance to the Nazi occupation and the female character's "self-development" weigh more or the less the same, or are far too close in weight to be healthy. This is an unpleasant thing to say, but this is what one draws from the experience of the film. This is the literal meaning of a loss of perspective: the artist cannot draw things in their proper proportions.

In short, Armstrong's and Brock's liberal-minded and feminist sensibilities, and their aesthetic extensions or equivalents, prove inadequate to the task of seriously tackling the events at hand.

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