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# Robert Koch, the fighter of death

**Robert Koch, The Fighter of Death** is a biopic starring Emil Jannings in the title role and Werner Krauss as his antagonist Rudolf Virchow . The film premiered on September 26, 1939 in Berlin 's Ufa-Palast am Zoo . Directed by Hans Steinhoff .

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## Storyline

The young country doctor Dr. Robert Koch is desperate because a tuberculosis epidemic takes the lives of numerous children in his district. Already every fourth child is affected by this insidious disease, and the parents have to watch as their little ones waste away miserably. For years Koch has been working feverishly to track down the causative agent of tuberculosis.

His work met with resentment and outright rejection from numerous colleagues. He is considered a charlatan, a phony who is completely on the wrong track with his assumptions and investigations. There are envious people, such as a teacher whose honor has been offended or the representative of a healer sect, but there are also much more serious opponents - above all the famous medical colleague and politician Privy Councilor Rudolf Virchow. This influential

### Movie

original title	<u>Robert Koch, the fighter of death</u>
production country	<u>Germany</u>
original language	<u>German</u>
Publishing year	<u>1939</u>
length	113 (world premiere) minutes
age rating	<u>FSK 12</u>
	<u>Rod</u>
directing	<u>Hans Steinhoff</u>
script	<u>CH Diller</u> <u>Walter Wasserman</u>
production	<u>Emil Jannings for Tobis</u>
music	<u>Wolfgang Zeller</u>
camera	<u>Fritz Arno Wagner</u>
cut	<u>Martha Dubber</u>
	occupation

- Emil Jannings : Dr. Robert Koch
- Werner Krauss : Privy Councilor Dr. Rudolph Virchow
- Viktoria von Ballasko : Sister Else
- Raimund Schelcher : Dr. Fritz von Hartwig, Koch's assistant
- Hilde Körber : Ms. Gührke
- Theodor Loos : Dr. George Gaffky
- Otto Graf : Dr. Friedrich Loeffler
- Hildegard Grethe : Emmy Koch
- Peter Elsholtz : Dr. Karl Wetzel, Virchow's secretary
- Josef Sieber : Forest warden Gührke

member of the Reichstag sharply denies Koch's assumption that tuberculosis is caused by a bacillus.

Intrigues and slander hamper Koch's indefatigable thirst for research, but cannot stop him. One day, the young doctor succeeds in proving his suspicions. The Ministry of Health then invited him to Berlin to continue his research there undisturbed and with the necessary financial means. But even in the capital, various forces are trying to torpedo Robert Koch's work.

## Production

*Robert Koch, the Fighter of Death* was shot from March 20 to June 1939 on the Tobis grounds in Berlin-Johannisthal . The film was based on Hellmuth Unger's novel *Robert Koch, Novel of a Great Life* .

The Nazi commissioned production received a wealth of awards at its premiere: particularly valuable in terms of state politics and art, valuable culturally, valuable for folklore, valuable for young people. At the end of 1939, the film received first prize at the international film art exhibition in Venice , the Biennale . The film was not banned by the Allies.

The two superstars of German film over the past twenty years, Emil Jannings and Werner Krauß, appeared together in front of the camera for the first time in a talkie. Three years later they were again (and for the last time) opponents in The Release .

Emil Hasler designed the extensive film constructions, which were carried out by Heinrich Weidemann and Fritz Lück . Karl Julius Fritzsche took over production management, Gustav Rathje was his deputy. Gerhard Staab was the production manager, Hans Grimm provided the sound and Arno Richter designed the costumes.

As a result of the great success of the film, which was massively supported by the government, there was a real Robert Koch hype for a short time: The German press reported, for example, that after the victorious conclusion of the invasion of Poland , i.e. exactly at the time when the film was in the Reich started, several of Koch's personal files, which had previously been stolen by the Polish side from the former Prussian government building in Posen , in Warsaw State Hygiene Institute as 'Polish looted

- Bernhard Minetti : spokesman for the healers
- Paul Bildt : Baron von Kossin, member of the Reichstag
- Elisabeth Flickenschildt : his wife
- Paul Dahlke : teacher
- Rolf Prasch : Kaiser Wilhelm I.
- Paul Otto : District Administrator of Hartwig
- Rudolf Klein-Rogge : Board of Auditors
- Walter Werner : usher Stübecke
- Jakob Tiedtke : Clerk Michalke
- Friedrich Otto Fischer : Imperial Chancellor Prince Otto von Bismarck
- Karl Haubenreiser : Director of the Charité
- Eduard von Winterstein : Professor Ernst von Bergmann
- Lucie Höflich : Koch's patient Mrs. Paul
- Bernhard Goetzke : Koch's patient Neschmann
- Gertrud Wolle : cleaning lady
- Werner Pledath : Scientist in the Pathological Institute
- Karl Hannemann : cattle dealer
- Karl Platen : Herr Kruhlke
- Leopold von Ledebur : Reichstag servant
- Josef Reithofer : Virchow's first assistant doctor
- Franz Stein, Klaus Pohl, Paul Rehkopf, Robert Forsch: Wissenschaftler im Pathologischen Institut
- Hubert von Meyerinck: Fähnrich Graf
- Werner Schott: Arzt
- Ernst Dernburg, Erich Dunskus, Carl Jönsson, Willy Kaiser-Heyl, Philipp Manning, Egon Vogel: Mitglieder der Berliner Fakultät

goods' were confiscated. These documents were brought to the Robert Koch Museum in Berlin. Hellmuth Unger's cooking novel reached the sales mark of 100,000 copies in autumn 1940 thanks to the promotion by the Steinhoff film. The author Gerhard Menzel , who was involved in the Robert Koch film, in turn wrote the Koch play "The Immortal", which premiered at the Hamburg Schauspielhaus on September 5, 1940. Radio plays about Koch were broadcast on both the Deutschlandsender and the Reichssenders in Berlin and Breslau , one of which was based on Günther Weisenborn 's play "The Good Enemies". <sup>[1]</sup>

## Reviews

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In 'Der deutsche Film 1938–1945' one reads: "This Robert Koch memorial was filmed from a kneeling position: Duty, willingness to make sacrifices, the absolute belief of a researcher in his mission, the politically correct (Bismarck supporter) action and hardly a love scene" <sup>[2]</sup> . This contrasted with the characterization of Koch's liberal opponent Rudolf Virchow: "Krauss drew Virchow as the medical pope, as the scholar lost in his own dogma, as the ambitious old man standing in the spotlight of the court, who only with innermost reluctance embraced the new epoch of medical knowledge acknowledges." <sup>[2]</sup>

The Lexikon des Internationales Films writes: "The way it is portrayed shows Steinhoff's film as a typical example of Nazi production: with great actors, a figure from the German past is stylized, whose superiority allows him to use any means whatsoever. Here he also helps to keep the German tribe pure" <sup>[3]</sup>

Kay Weniger 's large dictionary of characters in the film said of Steinhoff's staging that the "biography of the physician Robert Koch, on the other hand, was highly stylized by the native of Saxony as a tribute to the German spirit of research. According to Steinhoff's equation, Koch, like Hitler, stands for the new and daring, the bold and revolutionary. The film wants to insinuate that he, like Hitler, would face numerous inadequate and narrow-minded adversaries whose faintheartedness would blind them to the visions of the godlike innovators." <sup>[4]</sup>

Reclam's film guide points out the following with regard to the Koch film and similar Nazi productions of those years, which focused on oversized leaders: "Portraits of great Germans skillfully weave the myth of the leader who goes his way undeterred by hateful opponents and petty doubters and if necessary makes the right decision based on his ingenious intuition, even against logical arguments." <sup>[5]</sup>

Bucher's encyclopedia of film weights this staging and similar works by Steinhoff in order to classify its position and importance in National Socialist film: "Established with the tendentious biography *Robert Koch* (1939), the Heimatfilm *Die Geierwally* (1940) and above all *Ohm Krüger* (1941). Steinhoff himself as the most loyal star director of the Third Reich." <sup>[6]</sup>

Karlheinz Wendtland commented on the film: "Hans Steinhoff, a loyal supporter of Hitler, used the path of life of the country doctor, the practitioner Dr. Raise Cook heroically. At the same time, he took the opportunity to convert Koch's academic opponent, Rudolf Virchow, one of the great liberals of his time, who he really was politically, into a senile reactionary, a representative of 'decadent democracy'. Still, Steinhoff made a great film. This is precisely what makes his work so dangerous. He brings remarkably realistic and humorous scenes, shows extraordinarily affectionate character types, even expressionistic symbolism. The duel between Krauss and Jannings is fascinating. How they speak and act - it's a great pleasure to look at!" <sup>[7]</sup>

## Siehe auch

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- [Liste der während der NS-Zeit im Deutschen Reich uraufgeführten deutschen Spielfilme](#)

## Weblinks

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- *Robert Koch, der Bekämpfer des Todes* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031868/>) in der [Internet Movie Database](#) (englisch)
- *Robert Koch, der Bekämpfer des Todes* (<https://www.filmportal.de/4c3a59c0824b41c896900ca5955aa093>) bei [filmportal.de](#)
- *Robert Koch, der Bekämpfer des Todes* (<http://www.murnau-stiftung.de/movie/732>) In: Murnau-Stiftung.de

## Einzelnachweise

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1. Vgl. dazu Bogusław Drewniak: Der deutsche Film 1938–1945. Ein Gesamtüberblick. Düsseldorf 1987, S. 202 f.
2. Der deutsche Film 1938–1945, S. 202
3. Klaus Brüne (Red.): Lexikon des Internationalen Films, Band 6, S. 3135. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1987.
4. Kay Weniger: *Das große Personenlexikon des Films. Die Schauspieler, Regisseure, Kameraleute, Produzenten, Komponisten, Drehbuchautoren, Filmarchitekten, Ausstatter, Kostümbildner, Cutter, Tontechniker, Maskenbildner und Special Effects Designer des 20. Jahrhunderts.* Band 7: R – T. Robert Ryan – Lily Tomlin. Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, Berlin 2001, ISBN 3-89602-340-3, S. 465.
5. Reclams Filmführer. Von Dieter Krusche, Mitarbeit: Jürgen Labenski. Stuttgart 1973. S. 145.
6. Bucher's Encyclopedia of Film. Edited by Liz-Anne Bawden, edition of the German edition by Wolfram Tichy. Lucerne and Frankfurt/M. 1977, p. 735.
7. Karlheinz Wendtland: *Beloved Kintopp. All German feature films from 1929-1945 with numerous artist biographies* born in 1939 and 1940, Verlag Medium Film Karlheinz Wendtland, Berlin, first edition 1987, second edition 1989, Film 75/1939, pp. 69, 70, ISBN 3-926945-03-6

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