Review – Through the Darkest of Times

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JANE KIRKPATRICK, JUL 20 2024

Through the Darkest of Times
Developed by Paintbucket Games, 2020

July 20 this year marks the 80th anniversary of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, primarily carried out by army officers. While resistance efforts like this and the non-violent White Rose student group are familiar to many, other courageous acts of resistance within Nazi Germany remain less known. Significant recognition of German resistance only began in the 1990s, with government commemorations starting in the early 2000s (Von Lengeling, 2002). Today, a memorial ceremony at the German Resistance Memorial Center will be attended by officials including Chancellor Olaf Scholz. This makes the strategy videogame, *Through the Darkest of Times* (TTDT)*,* particularly interesting and timely as it offers a novel role in the commemoration and recognition of German resistance. It provides an engaging format for understanding the horrors of the Nazi regime, the shifting politics of the time, and the life of many of those opposed to Nazi rule. Through its immersive narrative, TTDT provides a unique and insightful look into the bravery and complexity of German resistance efforts.

Players make strategic decisions as the leader of a small group of resistors in Berlin. Gameplay alternates between story elements grounded in historical realities and a map of Berlin showing various missions available each week. These missions range from lower-risk actions like buying paper or paint to create and spread leaflets or write slogans on walls, to more dangerous tactics such as transmitting military intel, hiding Wehrmacht deserters or bomb making.

The story spans four chapters and an epilogue and includes weekly newspaper headlines of real events like the Reichstag fire. Chapter one begins with Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in February 1933, covering the rise of pre-war fascism, the consolidation of power through legal means, and the shock and disbelief felt by some. The second chapter takes place during the 1936 Berlin Olympics, a platform for Nazi propaganda to reach an international audience. The third chapter is set against the backdrop of the 1941 occupation of France and invasion of the Soviet Union. If you make it that far, the fourth takes place towards the end of the war and the epilogue follows a year after war ends.

The 1930s atmosphere is captured through simple, muted artwork inspired by 1920s expressionism, the developers wanting to show what it might have looked like in the 1930s if the Nazis hadn't banned it (Journal of Geek Studies, 2019). The music transitions from upbeat cabaret, which you might take advantage of in a morale-boosting dance at the Giraffe, to a sombre and tense beat, enhancing the increasing sense of foreboding.

Players must react to events and their effects on the group, such as job losses, coal shortages, or family members joining the Nazis party, being sent to the front or arrested. Increasing the number of supporters is essential for expanding the range of missions, and resources like money, intel, and army uniforms may be needed. As each week grows grimmer and more dangerous, morale inevitably declines, which must be countered by successful missions and making the 'right' decisions for the group.

Players start by selecting a character with a job, such as a welder, judge, or waiter, and a political affiliation that opposed Nazism, including Catholic Conservative, Moderate Liberal, Social Democrat, Communist, and Anarchist. Two random members are added to the group, with the option to recruit more from a selection. Each character has

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skills in propaganda, empathy, secrecy, strength and literacy, which align better with certain missions. A communist with propaganda skills may excel at talking to workers or soliciting donations in working-class Kreuzberg but might struggle making connections with a priest or getting donations in the more conservative Wedding district.

The developers were inspired by several resistance groups, including one led by Harro Schulze-Boysen and Arvid Harnack (Journal of Geek Studies, 2019), who worked for the Reich administration and transmitted intel to the Soviet Union. Another, the Baum group, consisted mostly of young Jews with communist sympathies. A German social movement resisting Hitler never materialised. Instead, individuals acted alone, and groups were typically small, disparate, and often unaware of each other's existence (Von Langeling, 2002). Forming a politically diverse group in TTDT can be advantageous, though it does perhaps convey a sense of solidarity and diversity that was less common within resistance groups, which often came together through common political leanings. This has been recognised to some extent through the potential for internal conflict that you'll need to resolve.

Historians have debated the extent to which the German population was powerless to resist in such a repressive environment, where even speaking out was considered treasonous and thousands of opposition members were arrested. While it may seem that resistance was nearly impossible, it has been suggested that a Nazi terror-state myth has emerged to explain the perceived passivity of the citizenry, but the population did or could have resisted more actively, particularly those groups not directly targeted by the Nazis (see Johnson, 1999; Kershaw, 1999; Wolfgram, 2006). This tension is reflected in the game through the difficulty in completing missions and the fluctuating levels of risk, as certain areas of Berlin or group members come under greater surveillance, potentially leading to injury, arrest and even torture. Significantly though, TTDT illustrates that there was also hope and solidarity – you can attend a mass protest (before they were banned), support fellow members, receive help from strangers, and get hopeful news from journalists and resistance efforts outside the country. Ultimately, the game portrays individuals willing to take risks and some successful acts of resistance taking place, albeit in limited forms.

Unlike many videogames where the mission is to shoot Nazis without question, TTDT's strength lies in demonstrating the regime's impact on everyday life, how daily activities became politicised, and individual and everyday acts of resistance could be significant. While there is little character development, aside from the main story primarily told through the group leader and occasional news or opinions from other members, the game evokes a strong emotional response. The sense of fear, sadness, guilt, and powerlessness is palpable when witnessing abuse or learning about concentration camps and atrocities on the Eastern front. Would you intervene when an elderly Jewish man is about to be beaten by the SA or cross the line of brownshirts outside a shop wielding placards saying, "Don't buy from the Jews!"? Or would you ignore it, fearing it might be too risky and draw attention to your group? The game effectively captures the moral dilemmas and emotional weight of resistance, making it a powerful and thought-provoking experience.

Like other narrative games, some decisions in TTDT may feel somewhat redundant with little consequence, but most do progress the story and immerse you in it. There isn't extensive overlap between the story and mission elements, though new missions can become available depending on your curiosity and exploration within the story. Despite the complexity of the issues presented, the simple mechanics of the mission side can start to feel repetitive. At the beginning of each chapter many elements are reset, and missions and their impact are again limited as you work to rebuild supporters and morale. Bigger, riskier missions that appear later require several elements to align, such as critical intel, multiple army uniforms, explosives, or a truck, making them almost impossible to achieve within the 20 turns available per chapter. While potentially frustrating to play, this reflects the real difficulties and futility faced by those attempting such tactics. Probably, like those involved, you begin to question whether the risks are worth it and if your actions will make any difference. Despite knowing that resistance within Germany failed to stop Hitler's regime, the game encourages you to take action, however small.

The message of TTDT is clear and the developers don't shy away from parallels to current politics. The rising levels of fascism in Europe, particularly Germany, and the US motivated them to create a game with an anti-fascist message and to demonstrate that "history is not only changed by generals and leaders, but by all of us" (Journal of Geek Studies, 2019, p.54). While TTDT isn't fun in the traditional sense, it is an enjoyable and engaging way to understand how and why people resisted (or why they didn't) and the complex factors influencing those decisions. It

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serves as an excellent platform for learning and teaching about this period of history, overlooked aspects of resistance to the Nazis, and resisting oppressive regimes more broadly.

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