Netflix's 'Nr 24' Honors the Norwegian Resistance

By Bruce Bawer

Norwegians get some things wrong, but for the most part they do patriotism right. In no other Western European country do the people celebrate their country's birthday as enthusiastically as Norwegians do on Constitution Day, May 17. People in other countries are loath to fly their own flags (in Britain, doing so seems to have become a crime), but on May 17 every city in Norway is a blizzard of red, white, and blue. In no other country, moreover, have such a high proportion of the costliest, most high-profile, and highest-grossing movies in recent years told the stories of real-life national heroes. *Amundsen* (2009) detailed Roald Amundsen's conquest of the South Pole; *Kon-Tiki* (2012) recounted Thor Heyerdahl's famous 1947 Polynesia expedition. *Max Manus* (2006) and *The 12th Man* (2017) revisited the lives of famous members of the Resistance movement during the Nazi occupation. And *Kongens Nei* (2016) celebrated King Haakon VII's refusal to knuckle under to the Nazis.

These were all strong films, and now there's a new one to add

to the list. At this writing, the most popular offering on Netflix is *Number 24,* about Gunnar Sønsteby (1918-2012), a young Oslo accountant, originally from the town of Rjukan in Telemark, who joined the Resistance shortly after the Germans took over ("Number 24" was one of his code names) and ended up becoming the most decorated Norwegian of all time. Written by Erlend Loe and Espen Lauritzen von Ibenfeldta and directed by John Andreas Andersen, *Number 24* is a surprisingly moving piece of work, superbly acted and photographed and richly authentic in its period feel.

Sønsteby's story is told by cutting back and forth between scenes of his wartime exertions and, decades later, his appearance – he's now an old man, played effectively by Erik Hivju – before an audience of students at his old high school in Rjukan. Recalling the arrival of the Nazis ("it took only 800" of them to occupy all of Oslo), he tells the kids: "I felt safe…right up until it wasn't safe….We thought that we lived in a postwar period. Then we learned that we lived in an interwar period." Playing the young wartime Sønsteby is Sjur Vatne Brean, who looks very much like a twentyish Adrien Brody and whose performance is deeply sensitive and subtle. Unable to concentrate at work because of the occupation, Sønsteby is invited by a coworker to join a group of amateur Resistance fighters. Their first effort – we see a couple of dozen hapless, ragtag Norwegians exchanging fire with Nazis in a forest outside of Oslo – is a disaster. "We didn't stand a chance," the elder Sønsteby. "We were so damned unprepared. And I promised myself I would never again be so unprepared."

After the debacle in the woods, Sønsteby helps put out an underground paper. But it's not enough for him. Crossing the border into Sweden, he presents himself at the British legation – Norway's government-in-exile was based in London – and is given a task: to persuade the head of Norway's national bank to lend him the bank's printing plates so that the Resistance can print bank notes to fund its operations. This is the first of many escapades that put the Resistance on the map. Before long, the Nazis are hunting them down and

torturing them. And serving among those Nazis were not a few Norwegians, who, the elderly Sønsteby tells the students in Rjukan, “were worse than the German Nazis.”

When a Resistance member cracks under torture and names Sønsteby, he’s forced to clear out. Flown by the British authorities from Sweden to Scotland, he discovers that his very success at carrying out so much Resistance work without being caught makes him a figure of suspicion: “Why have you survived,” a British officer asks him, “when so many of your colleagues haven’t?” Sønsteby’s succinct reply: “I plan and prepare.” (One aspect of his immense discipline is that he refuses, for the duration, to drink or smoke or consort with women — and he urges his fellow members of the Resistance to do the same.) Eventually the Brits realize that Sønsteby isn’t a double agent but rather, as one of them tells him, “one of those rare and brilliant individuals who can achieve things others can not.” They proceed to put him through several months of training, then return him to Norway, where he and his team, known to history as the Oslo gang, set some extraordinary explosions — destroying, among other buildings, a weapons factory in Kongsberg — and assassinating Nazis, including 28 Norwegians.

Flash to decades later, when the elderly Sønsteby is taking questions from the high-school kids, one of whom, a girl, pesters him with questions about the morality of his wartime actions. Hasn’t he ever heard, she asks, about Gandhi’s concept of nonviolent resistance? “Gandhi wasn’t fighting the Nazis,” says Sønsteby. She persists. After Sønsteby and his crew took out Karl Marthinsen, head of the state police (and, Sønsteby tells the students, “the biggest mass murderer in modern Norwegian history”), the Nazis liquidated several Norwegians in reprisal. “How many lives was it worth to kill Marthinsen?” the girl demands. “That’s impossible to answer,” replies Sønsteby. “What is freedom worth?”

Both in his youth and in his old age, Sønsteby is a man of

action, not words. But when he does have something vital to communicate, he does so briefly, clearly, and effectively. “I plan and prepare.” “What is freedom worth?” The young Sønsteby doesn’t have the time or the need to speechify about freedom, but the older Sønsteby, aware that the young people in his audience probably don’t appreciate their freedom, repeats the point more than once. In what I hope are the waning days of a woke era, it’s stirring to see a character in a big-budget film utter the simple home truths that Sønsteby does. Three cheers for the screenwriters.

Not that the schoolgirl who hounds Sønsteby during the Q&A is pacified by his remarks. Indeed, one soon begins to suspect that the question of killing Norwegian Nazis has more than a theoretical significance for her. It does. And as the truth emerges, we cut from the schoolroom back to the war – and to a distressing but necessary action that throws into high relief the broad gulf between courage and cowardice, resistance and submission, heroism and treason, and that reminds us that these things have their roots in childhood and youth.

The only thing that slightly mars the experience of witnessing this splendid cinematic achievement is the realization that this is one more movie that’s out to remind us just how evil the Nazis were – which is probably the only lesson from history that most Western people in the 21st century don’t need to be reminded of. Where are the Norwegian films – or *any* films – about the evil of Communism? The only mention of Communism in *Number 24* comes near the very beginning, when a teenage Sønsteby and his best friend have a brief exchange about book burning and other depredations in Nazi Germany. The friend suggests that perhaps such actions are needed to address the Communist threat; in reply, Sønsteby sharply defends the right of people to hold opinions. And that’s the end of it.

Sønsteby, as it happens, lived through the entire Cold War. And when he was asked, some time after World War II, how he

felt about the “partisans” – the Resistance members in northern Norway who were Communists, loyal to Stalin and to the Soviet Union, and who, in the postwar years, didn’t receive the kind of respect and praise from their fellow Norwegians that Sønsteby did – his characteristically laconic reply was: “But they *were* Communists.” In short, he was no more fond of Communism than he was of Nazism. It would have been nice if some such remark could have somehow been worked into *Number 24.* But this is a minor quibble about a motion picture of great aesthetic beauty and moral virtue that deserves a wide audience and a fistful of prizes – and that should, in particular, be shown to young people who don’t even understand the difference between living in freedom and in a dictatorship.

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