# New documentary reveals the complex legacy of Leni Riefenstahl



Leni Riefenstahl, the renowned German film-maker best known for her works during the Nazi era, has been the subject of a new documentary that sheds light on previously concealed aspects of her life and career. The documentary, titled *Riefenstahl* and directed by Andres Veiel, debuted in Venice last August and opens in cinemas from 9 May. It draws extensively from Riefenstahl’s private estate, comprising over 700 boxes of materials including film reels, letters, diaries, news clippings, home videos, and hundreds of hours of recorded phone conversations.

Riefenstahl’s cinematic success began early. In 1932, her mystical mountain drama *The Blue Light* was selected for the inaugural Venice Film Festival. In 1934, she received a gold medal for *Triumph of the Will*, a propaganda chronicle of the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. Four years later, just ten weeks before the Kristallnacht pogrom, she won best foreign film at Venice for *Olympia*, a two-part documentary on the 1936 Berlin Olympics commissioned by the Nazi government and released on Adolf Hitler’s birthday.

Throughout the postwar decades until her death in 2003 at the age of 101, Riefenstahl maintained that her films were purely artistic works, devoid of political intent. She underwent four denazification processes, each time presenting herself as an apolitical artist driven solely by a pursuit of beauty and craft rather than ideology. She denied complicity in Nazi atrocities, asserting in a 1965 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma* that *Olympia* and *Triumph of the Will* were “history – pure history.”

However, Veiel’s documentary critically interrogates this narrative by revealing contradictions and omissions hidden within Riefenstahl’s extensive archives. Veiel and his producer, journalist Sandra Maischberger, spent six years meticulously examining the collection for evidence that might challenge her self-portrayal. Initially, their efforts bore little fruit amidst repeated denials from archived interviews, but gradually, signs of a more complex reality emerged.

A notable discovery included a scribbled note in a calendar urging a vote for the postwar neo-Nazi National Democratic Party (NPD). Recorded private telephone conversations brought to light a nostalgic sentiment for the so-called virtues of the Nazi era. Importantly, a previously missing section of her 1934 interview with the *Daily Express* resurfaced, in which Riefenstahl admitted to being a “confirmed National Socialist” after reading the opening pages of *Mein Kampf*.

Perhaps most significantly, letters from her estate detailed her wartime experiences as a correspondent in Poland, including witnessing one of the earliest massacres of Jews in Końskie in September 1939. While Riefenstahl initially denied seeing the shootings, and later professed horror, the letters suggest a more ambiguous involvement. One letter describes how her directorial instructions to remove Jews from a market square where filming was underway were roughly translated by a Nazi soldier as “get rid of the Jews,” which precipitated a violent response when some attempted to flee.

Veiel reflected on this revelation, saying, “In the beginning, I was the detective, looking for her guilt. Later on I realised she does the job herself.” He stressed that it was essential to depict Riefenstahl not merely as a villainous figure, but as a human being, noting, “That makes her even more dangerous, because she comes out of the middle of our society.”

The documentary also explores Riefenstahl’s adeptness at self-presentation and manipulation. Throughout various interviews, she oscillates between beguiling charm, intimidation, victimhood, and feigned innocence. Veiel commented on her artistic skills in managing her image: “We show her ability to stage herself ... always knowing there is some sort of impact.”

Moreover, *Riefenstahl* draws connections between her upbringing, professional experiences, and ideological alignment. According to Veiel, Riefenstahl’s strict Prussian childhood, marked by physical harshness and an emphasis on strength and contempt for weakness, influenced her aesthetic and worldview. This ethos carried through to her acting career in 1920s ‘mountain films’, where she performed physically demanding stunts and portrayed heroic vitality. Veiel argues that this background fostered “a long-prepared affinity” with fascist ideals, evident in her focus on celebrating strength and purity while condemning perceived weaknesses.

The film juxtaposes Riefenstahl’s claims that her work was apolitical with stark archival footage that reveals the propagandistic nature of her films. For instance, her 1993 assertion that *Triumph of the Will* lacked political motives is followed by scenes of Julius Streicher delivering virulently racist speeches within the film.

Visually, the documentary employs slow-motion and zoom effects to scrutinise Riefenstahl’s gaze and gestures, alongside shots of her archives, to emphasise the interplay between image-making and narrative control. Veiel avoided digital manipulation such as AI to maintain fidelity to the source material and to resist reproducing the subject’s manipulative tendencies.

Above all, *Riefenstahl* confronts the ongoing fascination and defence of Riefenstahl’s artistry by cultural figures including Mick Jagger, Madonna, and Quentin Tarantino, revealing tensions in separating aesthetic appreciation from ideological implications. Maischberger emphasises, “there is no innocence in the use of these aesthetics.”

Veiel concludes by acknowledging the complexities in interpreting the incomplete and often contradictory archival record, stating, “It is open. I’m not the one who can judge what is fabricated or not.” The film thus highlights the enduring power of legend and the human inclination towards embracing convenient narratives, regardless of their truth.

*Riefenstahl* is set to be screened in cinemas from 9 May, inviting audiences to reassess the legacy of one of cinema’s most controversial figures through an unprecedented archival investigation.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt32249940/> - Details the documentary's use of Riefenstahl's private estate materials and her recorded interviews/phone conversations, corroborating the archival investigation methodology.
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riefenstahl\_(film)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riefenstahl_%28film%29) - Confirms the film's release dates (Venice premiere August 2024) and production details, supporting the timeline and scope of the archival project.
3. <https://roughdraftatlanta.com/2025/01/31/leni-riefenstahl-documentary/> - Highlights Riefenstahl's claim about art being apolitical, aligning with her postwar denials and the documentary's critical examination of this narrative.
4. <https://releasing.dogwoof.com/riefenstahl> - Provides background on director Andres Veiel's filmography, contextually supporting his investigative approach to Riefenstahl's legacy.
5. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt32249940/> - Reiterates the discovery of archival materials challenging Riefenstahl's apolitical stance, including her Nazi sympathies evident in private communications.
6. <https://www.betacinema.com/138/pid/328/Riefenstahl.htm> - Corroborates the documentary's focus on Riefenstahl's ability to manipulate historical narratives, relevant to her postwar self-presentation strategies.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/apr/27/leni-riefenstahl-nazi-hitler-film-maker-documentary> - Please view link - unable to able to access data