

# Münchhausen

Germany | 1943 | 119 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Josef von Báky
<b>Screenplay</b>	Gottfried August Bürger (book - uncredited) Erich Kästner (screenplay - as Berthold Bürger) Rudolph Erich Raspe (stories - uncredited)
<b>Photography</b>	Konstantin Irmen-Tschet/Werner Krien
<b>Music</b>	Georg Haentzschel

## Cast

<b>Baron Münchhausen</b>	Hans Albers
<b>Der Mondmann</b>	Wilhelm Bendow
<b>Zarin Katharina II</b>	Brigitte Horney
<b>Herzog Karl von Braunschweig</b>	Michael Bohnen

## In Brief

As the centerpiece for Ufa's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, *Münchhausen* offered Germans reeling from news of defeat in Stalingrad a welcome escape. Created in conjunction with the Ministry of Propaganda, the film enacts the definitive Aryan fantasy in this tale of a man who masters his own destiny and marshals the march of time. The protagonist's legendary powers become employed in Hitler's war effort, literally cast in the role of a wonder weapon—the illusory means by which the Ministry of Propaganda sought to reanimate a paralyzed nation. A popular vehicle and the product of a world war, *Münchhausen* represents one of the Third Reich's consummate cinematic achievements.



The ghost of filmmaking pioneer Georges Méliès, who first explored the magical possibilities of cinema in his *Voyage to the Moon*, smiles over the exuberant *Münchhausen*, whose genial hero also ascends to the moon (though in a hot air balloon), and meets not only the resident man in the moon but also his wife.

The intended occasion for this multimillion-mark spectacle, however, was hardly the glorification of a Frenchman but rather the celebration of UFA's silver jubilee. Goebbels lavished resources to create a handsome showcase for Agfacolor, the German process that favors tomato reds, warm ambers and sky blues (delivering the same thousand-watt brightness as Technicolor, but downplaying the scarlets and electric blues of the American system). If the ivory hues and natural skin tones turn waxen now and then, the special effects of Konstantin Irmen-Tschet (who worked on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*) are historically state-of-the-art, while the witty production design suggests the garish but fanciful illustrations of a children's volume of fairy tales, Breughel for babies.

Also included in *Münchhausen's* brief was a surprising license for whimsy and frivolity, hardly the Third Reich's strong point (even allowing some blithe disrespect of military endeavors, at a time when the Wehrmacht was being trounced at Stalingrad). This is a film where paintings on the wall look back at the spectator and wink, and indeed it is directed with many felicities and further winks by Josef von Báky (long experienced in Hungarian-themed musicals) who orchestrates graceful rhythms to match the sprightly score of heroic themes, tango strains, and spirited harem shimmies.

As befits the story of a man adventuring through disparate communities, the film rarely uses isolating close-ups, but each episode has its own surprises. This is Teutonic magical realism, where inanimate objects leap with irrepressible high spirit. Coats and trousers jump out of the wardrobe and dance through the air, but when the Baron sits down to play the piano, violin music comes out. There's also a human timepiece, a ring that grants invisibility (but only for an hour), a rifle that shoots a hundred miles, and a horn whose notes get frozen in the Siberian winter but then burst out all at once when thawing.

As the convivial and perpetually priapic Baron, the blondly Aryan Hans Albers plays this adventurer and inveterate teller of tall tales with light-footed zest (but is it an accident or a sly joke that when he dons a monocle, he looks like Fritz Lang?). *Münchhausen* repeatedly spins epitaphs for himself ("The Earth was too small for him") and measures himself against Copernicus as a seeker of "knowledge in experience, beyond the intellect".



*Münchhausen*, both man and movie, rambles happily through foreign climes, tasting the pleasures of Catherine the Great's Petersburg (as well as of the empress herself). Petersburg's market square is here conceived as a boisterous carnival for lusty Kulaks, a Tivoli Gardens playground with fountains that spout wine and trees that bear sausages. Costumes are especially resplendent in Catherine's court, filled with brilliantly designed accoutrements like a gigantic cake that opens to reveal a dwarf playing a harpsichord (but the real dessert proves to be bowls of precious stones the size of eggs).

Though not especially charitable to women — remarking about one that "where other women have a heart, she only has cleavage" — the Baron strikes the fancy of the Empress. Sleek in her chiffon peignoirs and lace scanties, she offers a rare Third Reich picture of a woman in power (Nazis usually felt threatened by strong women).

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However, as presented here, her philosophy seems not far from Hitler's own: "When it comes to blows, it is better to give than to receive".

Münchhausen rides a cannonball through the clouds right into the Turkish sultan's palace, enjoying more than a few glimpses of topless houris who frolic in the harem pool. One droll exchange with a harem guard who lavishes praise on a favorite woman prompts the Baron to remark, "For a eunuch, you seem to be quite in love," while the latter ripostes with "It wasn't my heart they clipped!" Then, in Venice during Carnival, the peripatetic hero gets showered with confetti and streamers as flower-laden gondolas glide through the canals, though his suspiciously Dorian Gray-like youth arouses the jealousy of an aging Casanova and unwelcome interest from the Inquisition.

Throughout, von Báky's Baron acts considerably more adult than his counterpart in Terry Gilliam's *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen* (1989), portrayed as a dotty grandfather who seemed more Don Quixote than a credible rival to Casanova. If Gilliam finds room for several additional episodes (the Baron gets swallowed by a whale and treks into a volcano), the German version adds a witty frame story, where the modern-day Baron narrates his exploits to a squabbling young couple, but finally chooses to sacrifice the gift of immortality granted by Cagliostro for the love of his wife. So, after tomcatting around the world, the baron reaffirms the value of his wholesome, stay-at-home Aryan frau. Standing up for the family values of the Master Race, he gets to have his kuchen and eat it too.

The two versions also diverge in villainy: where Gilliam pits his Baron against a heartless bureaucrat, opposing imagination to reason, the Germans contrast pleasure with power through the Baron's encounters with the diabolical magician Cagliostro (unique to this version of the tale), so sinister that even black cats bristle and attack at his approach. Prodded by this trickster into an alliance to seize political power, the Baron chooses to decline, observing that "You want to rule and I want to live." Still, from the viewpoint of Goebbels and company, veterans of that mother of all political dirty tricks, the Reichstag Fire, Münchhausen's disinterest in power seems like wish fulfillment, an unlikely boyish fantasy to pursue adventure, naughty beauties, and a rousing good time.

His exploits become a literally fabulous footnote to history, but like Zarah Leander's *Astrée*, Münchhausen ultimately rubber stamps the impulse toward ethnic insularity, concluding that there's no place like home (fitting more than ever Eric Rentschler's description as "a Nazi Wizard of Oz"). Then, the Baron's final touching gesture of renouncing immortality approaches a Wagnerian grandeur, embracing death for love of his noble spouse, much as thanatos overwhelmed the regime itself.

- Robert Keser, *Bright Lights Film Journal*

## The Real Baron von Munchhausen

Born in Bodenwerder, Electorate of Brunswick-Lüneburg, Münchhausen was page to Anthony Ulrich II of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, and moved with his employer to the Russian Empire in 1737/38 during which time he attended the siege of Turkish Fortress of Ochakiv. He was named a cornet in the Russian cavalry regiment "Brunswick-Cuirassiers" when Anthony Ulrich became Russian generalissimo in 1739. In 1740, he was promoted to lieutenant. He was stationed in Riga, but participated in two campaigns against the Swedes in 1740 and 1741. When Anthony Ulrich was imprisoned in 1741, Münchhausen remained in the service of the Russian military. In 1750, he was named a Rittmeister, a cavalry captain. In 1744, he married Jacobine von Dunten at Pernigel (Latvian: Liepupe) near Dunteshof (Latvian: Dunte) in Livonia. After his retirement, he lived with his wife at his manor in Bodenwerder until her death in 1790. Here, he acquired a reputation for his witty and exaggerated tales; at the same time, he was considered an honest man in business affairs. Münchhausen remarried in 1794; the marriage ended in a contested, ruinous divorce. Münchhausen died childless in 1797.

The stories about Münchhausen were first collected and published by an anonymous author in 1781. An English version was published in London in 1785, by Rudolf Erich Raspe, as *Baron Munchhausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, also called *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*. However, much of the humorous material in them is borrowed from other sources. Indeed, the Baron himself was not notable for immodesty within his profession and relative to his accomplishments, and Raspe's publication rather damaged his reputation. Most historians agree that Munchhausen disapproved of some of the more outrageous of the tall tales that Raspe's book attributed to him. In 1786, Gottfried August Bürger translated Raspe's stories back into German, and extended them. He published them under the title of *Marvellous Travels on Water and Land: Campaigns and Comical Adventures of the Baron of Münchhausen*. Bürger's version is the one best known to German readers today.

During the 19th century, the story underwent expansions and transformations by many notable authors and was translated into numerous languages, totaling over 100 various editions. In 2005 a statue of Munchhausen was erected in the city of Kaliningrad (Königsberg). It is not clear how much of the story material derives from the Baron himself; however, it is known that the majority of the stories are based on folktales that have been in circulation for many centuries before Münchhausen's birth.

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