
Reviewed by Steven R. Cerf (Bowdoin College)  
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The Showing of Allied Documentary Atrocity Films in 1945 and 1946 and the Shaming of Three Groups of German Nationals

Ulrike Weckel’s title reveals her thesis in this path-breaking study of close to seven hundred pages. The historian has filled a gaping lacuna: she has analyzed in depth the immediate shaming effects of the screenings of ten different Allied documentary films of liberated concentration camps on three different groups of German nationals at the end of World War II: (1) the twenty-one Nazi defendants of the Nuremberg Trial; (2) the German prisoners of war held outside of Germany—in America or in England or in the British-occupied Near East; and (3) the German public residing throughout occupied Germany.

What makes Weckel unique is her rejection of the generalized and unanalytical approach of previous scholars in dealing with German reaction to Allied documentary films of the extermination and other labor or concentration camps shot at the end of the war and she has closely examined the actual shaming effect on each of the above-mentioned German audience groups. Never before in the history of German cinema had entire groups of differing film audiences been more closely observed, examined, questioned in surveys, or described in the public press. And yet these viewers’ reactions to these individual “atrocity films” have never been analyzed from a scholarly point of view.

This study serves another important function which will make it an indispensable standard source book within the field of post-World War Two documentaries in particular and in genocide studies in general: it contains not only Weckel’s penetrating reading of individual films as the focus of her first of four major sections, but includes as the sixty pages of appendices at the end of the study the extant complete written transcripts of the ten documentary films (in their respective original German, English and French texts—with a German translation of the one French film—and the German translation of the one Soviet-made film shown at the Nuremberg Trial; in total, there are four American films, three Soviet films, two British films, and one French film under discussion). The film footage contained in these documentaries was shot in both the closing months of World War Two and at the end of the war for firsthand evidence of Nazi extermination. The actual immediate showing of these atrocity documentaries in the postwar period was for the reeducation of the Germans that the Allies often discussed in their official communications. One linguistic point of information has to be mentioned at the outset: Weckel wisely includes throughout a preponderance of the original English-language documentation, untranslated into German, whether it is from official American or British government reports and correspondence on the making and showing of these atrocity documentaries or from the personal letters and diaries of the English-language directors or writers. For this reason, the study is truly, at times, bilingual (and it is published as volume forty-five in the Transatlantische Historische Studien series).
The four parts of the study are prefaced by a clearly voiced introduction and they conclude with a telling summary of Weckel’s main arguments. Importantly, the first part of the book, “Filmaufnahmen vom Unvorstellbaren,” 140 pages in length, contains fundamental information on each of the ten films, including its screening time and to which of the three German audiences under discussion it was shown. Also key to Weckel’s cinematic-sensitive interpretation is her precise treatment of each film’s genesis and the specific content of its documentary footage, the tone of the narrator, and the actual filmmakers’ respective goals as to creating the shaming effect each film had on its respective audience. This informational first part is important because it distinguishes each documentary from the others and is a first in secondary criticism where previously the films were often lumped together or their individual identity was confused with other documentary films.

Although the three major portions of the study devoted to the separate reactions to the screening of the documentaries are equally weighted as part of Weckel’s shaming thesis, they are not of equal length. The discussion of the twenty-one Nuremberg defendants is the shortest, at sixty pages. It is most concentrated and circumscribed by the limited amount of intended viewers during the film showings. Her discussion of the POW viewings is eighty pages and the discussion of showings to the German public throughout occupied Germany is close to two hundred pages. Ironically, as the smallest group of viewers, the surviving Nazi leaders, the defendants in Nuremberg, were the most closely observed of all of the three discrete groups. As a consequence, the defendants were well aware not only that their judges would be examining their physical reaction to the concentration camp footage, but that the press would communicate their reaction to a worldwide readership. The first of the two films that Weckel discusses is the American one-hour film Nazi Concentration Camps that was screened on the eighth day of the trial and actually was the first film to be shown in the courtroom. The purpose of the Allies showing this footage as key evidentiary material so early on was to prove that the Nazi leaders in the dock had been well aware of the existence of the German annihilation camps studding the European continent. As Weckel convincingly develops her thesis on public shaming, she believes that this early screening in November of 1945 before journalists from around the world set the public shaming tone for the Nazi leadership, as it was forced to recognize its knowledge of the omnipresent death camps. The showing of the film, with its detailed display of mass carnage, so early in the trial was to make it more difficult for the defendants to deny their knowledge of the camps. The film’s depiction of twelve camps, from the smallest to the most brutally large “death factories,” dramatically underscored the official Nazi policies of an ever-increasing genocide.

The journalistic coverage of the defendants’ differing physical reactions to the film made their shaming all the more public. Ironically, the reactions of the defendants became more important than the actual film being shown: a couple of them were seen crying, one turned his back to the screen for the entire showing, and some were seen fidgeting nervously. Tellingly, Hermann Göring, usually self-dramatizing, managed a mostly impenetrable response throughout. The numerous quotes from the press coverage tended to characterize the showing as an hour-long form of punishment. Weckel concludes the second portion of her study with a discussion of the anticlimactic showing of the Soviet-made film, Film Documents of the Atrocities of the German-Fascist Invaders, which was screened in February 1946 on the sixty-second day of the trial. The court observers regarded the film exclusively as a wrapping up of the Russian perspective. Also, and more importantly, most of the attendees at the trial were anxiously awaiting the actual testimony of the Nazi defendants. Tellingly, a presiding judge, Francis Biddle, in his 1962 writings points to the American film as having had a dramatic effect of visibly increasing the defendants’ sense of shame that prevented them from going along with Hermann Göring’s original plan to defend the Nazi policies and to go down in history as Nazi martyrs. Their different physical responses to the American documentary in the face of the incontrovertible evidence of Nazi genocide would have made such a strategy futile.

There are two aspects of the atrocity-film screenings to two hundred thousand prisoners of war that made their reactions most accessible for Weckel’s research: (1) the prisoners’ compulsory attendance at the screenings and (2) the fact that the POWs saw the films in large groups and then had the opportunity to discuss them in small groups rather than disbanding immediately. This self-contained viewing and the subsequent discussions made the wide spectrum of reactions consistently recognizable as ranging from contrite revulsion upon seeing the mammoth carnage at the camps to a strong belief that the films were nothing more than Allied propaganda. Reactions included several prisoners becoming so revolted by what they had just seen on the screen that they turned in their military medals and other honors, as well as the common belief that only the Nazi leadership was respon-
sible for the extermination policies of the Third Reich.

These prisoners in either American or British camps, away from Germany, were the subjects of the Allies’ strategy of moral reeducation and it is not known whether these types of documentaries were ever shown in either Soviet or French camps. Weckel’s convincing conclusions as to the wide spectrum of prisoner reactions stem from two different groups of sources: the reactions described in the prisoners’ autobiographical writings, both published or unpublished, and in their letters and articles appearing in the different prison newspapers; and those found in official reports or personal writings of Allied prison personnel or military spokespeople. Two elucidating points should be mentioned: the compulsory film showings were held in “neutral” settings without any prison administrative commentary, and the films’ immediate shock effect in the United States screenings was often diminished among those prisoners who had seen published newspaper pictures of the death camps in American newspapers prior to viewing the documentaries.

Tellingly described in this section is the sympathy that the war prisoners had for the deprivation of fellow Europeans living in a war-ravaged world (ironically the material standard of living of the prisoners was higher in America and Britain than it would have been at home). This concern for others prompted financial contributions from the prisoners’ own limited salaries for the suffering people abroad after just having viewed the concentration camp documentaries. From a prison a letter was sent with a group check to either a branch of the Red Cross or to the War Prisoners Aid of the YMCA, stating that the group donations were meant to relieve the suffering of the people of Europe and the victims of the concentration camps and their families. In many a personal letter appearing in the prison newspapers, the German prisoners drew a direct link between the atrocity films they had just seen and their inability to continue to defend Nazi antagonistic policies. Even though, as Weckel concedes, the documentaries were no miracle in immediately making the prisoners acknowledge their individual passivity in the face of the Nazi extermination campaign, these prison screenings helped many take a first step toward their moral reeducation.

By far the longest section of the study, the fourth one surveys the different ways that the Allies screened atrocity films for the postwar German public. Weckel wisely begins this five-part section with a survey of American and British political pressure on the German public to confront cinematically its tacit complicity with forms of Nazi racial and religious injustice. In so many of the direct quotes included, the English-speaking officials speak of the hope that the eventual German remorse might lead to self-insight and a form of rebirth and regeneration. They argue that although the Germans might not have known what specific activities were being perpetrated in the camps, their passivity throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich was undeniable. The documentary films of the liberated camps that the Germans were to see were not viewed in compulsory screenings and were to take place in highly publicized showings in movie theaters. In sum, the German public viewing of the concentration camp films was shown over a twenty-month period and began in May of 1945 in the British Zone. In the end, the public’s reaction to these viewings varied greatly.

Weckel covers the first showings in the British Zone, on May 19 in Minden and on May 30 in Burgsteinfurt, two Westphalia-area cities 150 kilometers apart. A revelatory movie poster for the Minden screening is included that not only lists the ten half-hour, free-of-charge repeated film showings, but also announces to the public that they should see the film to ascertain what Nazi atrocities were committed in the concentration camps. Although the identity of the actual film is not known, it must have been a British newsreel, for no British documentary had been completed by this early date. That the long line of moviegoers was overwhelming is reported in the official documents because not all the moviegoers could be accommodated in the ten screenings. When the Burgsteinfurt screening took place, the municipal government was forced by the occupation authority to enlist an audience to see the five-minute film and the attendees themselves were filmed, most of them smiling before the showing and agitated and depressed-looking when leaving the movie theater. No interviews of the attendees or questionnaire surveys were used to gauge the effects of the respective screenings.

The second set of screenings Weckel covers are five of the twenty-minute, American-made documentary KZ held in Erlangen in the American Zone in June and July of 1945. Although a select number of reaction survey questionnaires were handed out to some viewers, the Germans felt awkward in filling out these new types of forms and their responses were often understated or obsequious. But the American Opinion Survey Unit could clearly determine that thirty was the dividing age as to the differing responses to the documentary film. The public older than thirty was far more responsive to the film as a critique of Nazi barbarity, whereas the younger
people under thirty who had grown up in the Third Reich were more reluctant to accept the film’s criticism. Most of the highlights shared by Weckel from the official English-language reports of the screenings of KZ agreed that the audience was stunned and riveted by the pictures of carnage at the camps. These official reports also concluded that the audience wanted more: more individual stories and actual statistics. They also wanted the film to be longer.

The final set of screenings Weckel discusses is of the American-made, twenty-two-minute documentary Die Todesmühlen that “traveled” to movie houses in Bavaria, Hesse, Baden, Bremen, and finally to the American sector of Berlin from January to March of 1946. Although past discussions of the showings of this film negate its impact on the German public, Weckel, in her consistently differentiated approach, says the effects of the film on its audiences were varied, both in a positive and in a negative sense. In fact, an earlier showing of the film in Frankfurt in November of 1945 elicited audible gasps of emotional reaction by some audience members as well as a positive review in the Frankfurter Rundschau in which the reviewer spoke of the factual power of the documentary. This positive response anticipated the important role of journalists throughout Germany in the first three months of 1946. Not only did these reviews favorably analyze the film but they repeatedly entreated their readers to attend the film’s showing. The often good attendance figures for the viewing of the documentary and the fact that it played in a variety of different German locations reveal its overall effectiveness—even though individual responses to it might have varied as many Germans rejected their own complicity in the Nazi concentration camp policies. The ever-present attendance, though, reflects what Weckel discusses as a cinematic way that the Germans could see firsthand the annihilation that was the result of the Nazi regime. In many of the camp documentaries the moviegoers saw the citizenry of Weimar visiting the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp with its mounds of corpses. Their reactions resembled those of the filmed visitors: they too, were coming face to face with the devastating legacy of their Nazi past.

Refusing to enter into past debates about collective guilt, Weckel has chosen to individualize the Germans’ differing response to coping with their Nazi past beginning in 1945. Her approach to the shaming of the Germans comes across most clearly in her original analyses of the photographs included in the study that show the three different audiences to whom the documentaries were shown. The public shaming is clearly evident in the drooping heads and listlessness of the Nuremberg defendants after the American documentary has been screened in court (p. 221). The German POW faces are intensely glued to the screen while watching an Allied documentary of the camps—their concentration and earnestness are clear (p. 275) but a tearful reaction of shame by some is observable in another photo (p. 274). The exiting moviegoers from the screening in Burgsteinfurt with their hand-covered faces or tear-filled eyes reveal their sense of shameful guilt (p. 382). Two young women whose bad behavior at a previous screening had forced them to await a “compulsory” further screening as punishment are shown shamefacedly sitting in their seats in a downcast, embarrassed way. These photographs and their analyses provide a direct link to the title of the study, Beschämende Bilder.

It is only fitting to conclude on a positive note about this major scholarly contribution to documentary film studies. For her trailblazing study Weckel has already won two awards: in 2008, she won the Franz Steiner Prize for German-American Studies and in 2012, she won the Carl Erdmann Prize for her excellent Habilitation, which this Steiner-published book represents.

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