

Article

Memorializing Genocide II: Later Holocaust Documentaries

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1. Introduction

In the first of this series¹ (hereafter “Part I”), I reviewed four earlier Holocaust documentaries: two U.S. War department films produced right after the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, a famous 1955 French documentary (*Night and Fog*), and a 1973 British television documentary (*Genocide: 1941-1945*). I made three points about those films.

First, while the first two documentaries are composed mainly of footage of the actual death camps, the third documentary includes pictures of the remains of the camps at the time of the film’s production (ten years after the end of the war). The fourth documentary includes footage of interviews with a number of participants in the events of the time done at the time of the making of the documentary (i.e., the early 1970s). This was intended, I suggested, to underscore the fallibility of memory.

Second, there is a distinction to be made between the Holocaust and the Shoah. The Holocaust, in my usage, refers to the systematic torture and murder of 11 million people targeted because of a variety of identities: ethnicity (Jews, Roma); captured enemy troops (especially Soviet POWs); dissidents (Regime opponents, communists, and so on); religion (Jehovah’s Witnesses and Freemasons); lifestyle (gays, prostitutes); and the disabled. The Shoah was the special focus on the eradication of the Jewish population, which constituted 6 million of those 11 million victims, amounting to nearly 2/3 of European Jewry. Virulent anti-Semitism was key to Nazism from the beginning.

¹ Gary James Jason, “Memorializing Genocide I: Earlier Holocaust Documentaries,” *Reason Papers* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2016), pp. 64-88.

Third, the notion of collective guilt is dubious. This view—that all Germans collectively were guilty of the war crimes committed by the Nazi Regime—is pushed in the documentary directed by Billy Wilder. I argued that this view was (and is) indefensible on its face and was likely so alienating to the Germans that Wilder’s film saw little use as a tool of denazification by the Allies occupying Germany.

In this article, I want to consider later Holocaust documentaries produced by two filmmakers who have done excellent work: Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen and Claude Lanzmann. I will use these to explore two questions: First, to what extent are these documentaries themselves propaganda, and if so, how deceitful was it? Second, what role does displaying actual footage of the events the documentary is about play in the power of the film?

2. Films by Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen

The documentaries *Theresienstadt: Deception and Reality*, *The Liberation of Auschwitz*, and *The Liberation of Majdanek* were researched by Wolfgang Scheffler and produced and directed by Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen.² Von Zur Muhlen is an eminent documentary filmmaker, with twenty-six documentaries to her credit.³

Theresienstadt: Deception and Reality has some exceedingly interesting materials, such as rare footage and interviews with survivors, although it is difficult to follow in places. The film opens with appalling images of the Warsaw ghetto, contrasted with images of the Theresienstadt ghetto where people are seemingly healthy and happy. The announcer lets us know that the latter scenes are from a 1944 Nazi propaganda film aimed at “deceiving public opinion” about how Jews were being treated in the camp system. The goal of the documentary is to inform the viewer how the camp was used as propaganda and how it figured in the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

Theresienstadt was (and is) a town in Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic). It is an old city with a large fortress on the edge of the town, which in 1941 was turned into a concentration camp to hold

² *Theresienstadt: Deception and Reality*, directed by Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen (Artsmagic Ltd., 2005); *The Liberation of Auschwitz*, directed by Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen (Artsmagic Ltd., 2005); and *The Liberation of Majdanek*, directed by Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen (Artsmagic, Ltd., 2006).

³ See “Irmgard Von Zur Muhlen,” *IMDB.com*, accessed online at: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0903287/?ref=fn_al_nm_1.

Czech Jews awaiting transport to the extermination camps. There were about 90,000 Czech Jews; in 1942, the SS decided to relocate all of the Jewish Czech residents to the town, thus turning it into a ghetto. It was thus a fusion of ghetto and holding camp, with the goal of holding Jews until they could be killed. In 1942, the SS had the prisoners lay a railway line directly from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz.

The film shows us the abuse heaped upon the Jews from the moment of their arrival. The viewer discovers what a hell it was through testimonials by survivors as well as through pictures drawn and buried by prisoners at the time. Over its short existence, the camp held about 150,000 prisoners, with 90,000 of them being sent to Auschwitz to be killed and nearly 36,000 dying in the camp. Only about 17,000 survived to be liberated.

What was unique about Theresienstadt was its use for propaganda purposes. Eminent World War II historian Karel Magry, interviewed in the film, instructs us that there were two distinct target audiences for this propaganda. First, it was used to reassure Jews that they were being sent east for benign purposes (purportedly to keep them safe from public attack). Second, it was intended to reassure Europeans that the Jews were not being abused or harmed, that they were instead given meaningful work in humane conditions and allowed a large measure of self-government.

The camp was thus used as an instrument of disinformation from the start. When the camp was turned into a ghetto, the Prague Jewish Committee of Elders was put in charge. This helped cover the lie that the Czech Jews would not be deported from this camp. After the Final Solution was codified at the Wannsee in 1942, when the SS started the deportation of Austrian and German Jews, they presented Theresienstadt as a home for elderly and prominent Jews (e.g., Jews who had fought with distinction for Germany in World War I or conspicuously helped its economy and culture). To be able to go to this supposed retirement resort, Jews were made to sign away their major assets to the SS in exchange for supposedly guaranteed life-long housing, accommodation, and medical care. Elaborate contracts were devised to give a patina of legitimacy to this charade. At the ghetto/camp, however, they were also stripped of even their minor assets and forced to live in horrible conditions. As one survivor put it ruefully, "The elderly died like flies."

Theresienstadt was the locus of even deeper deceptions, however. In 1943, the SS deported all Danish Jews there. Upon arrival, the Danish Jews were greeted by the Jewish leaders of the ghetto and

were fed well, whereupon the SS allowed the newly arrived prisoners to write home to report their good treatment. Only then were they subjected to the evils of the camp.

Despite the postcards, the Danish government started pushing for the right to send a representative and members of the Red Cross to inspect the camp. In late 1943, Adolf Eichmann ordered the camp to be cleaned up and beautified, with the town square opened to the prisoners, the ghetto bank reopened, and a café and children's centers built. To reduce the overcrowding, thousands of inmates were sent to their deaths at Auschwitz.

When this Potemkin village was ready, the SS permitted the Danish government to send a group to inspect it in June 1944. The group, including Maurice Rossel of the International Red Cross, was given a tour (nominally led by a Jewish Elder) that followed a tightly scripted timetable and route. The elderly were instructed to remain indoors.

The result was a great propaganda success for the SS. Rossel and the other officials were completely duped and wrote a report based on the lies they had been told. This Red Cross report, besides having the general ugly consequence of misleading world opinion about the camp system, also had a specific horrible consequence. The SS, before the tour, expected the Red Cross to issue a negative report and demand to see other camps, so they moved 5,000 prisoners from Theresienstadt to live in a "family camp" at Auschwitz. However, because the Red Cross sent no more inspectors, virtually all of the 5,000 sent to Auschwitz were quickly annihilated.

In early 1944, as the camp was being beautified, the SS decided to film a propaganda movie to show the world that the camp system as a whole was benign. The idea did not come from Joseph Goebbels or Heinrich Himmler, as one might have suspected, but from a lowly SS Major, namely, Hans Gunther, chief of the Prague Gestapo section in charge of Jewish affairs.

The film was written and directed by one of the prisoners, a famous Jewish actor and director named Kurt Gerron. Under duress, a Czech production company was ordered to produce the film, with the crew threatened with reprisals against their families for any information leaked. All of the actors were inmates who were told to wear their best clothes. Some volunteered to be in the film, hoping to escape deportation, if only for a time. Others were forced to collaborate. We see scenes of inmates relaxing; well-dressed children being fed bread and butter (Magry notes that the film had to be shot

repeatedly, because the famished children couldn't resist eating the food until the cameras rolled); kids frolicking in the park; children performing an opera; and a well-stocked library, with well-known German-Jewish intellectuals shown reading and delivering lectures.

Two weeks after filming, mass deportations occurred, including most of the participants in the film. Of those, 18,000 were sent to Auschwitz and most were gassed, including, ironically or not (depending upon your point of view), Geron.

On screen again, Magry notes that the film was only a limited success as a propaganda device. It was shown, in April 1945, to two more Red Cross officials in a camp tour personally guided by Eichmann. They were also duped. By the time the film was finished in March 1945, the war was nearly over and the SS never had time to show it abroad. Also, with the liberation of some of the Eastern camps by the Soviet Army starting in late 1944, the public learned of the truth of the camp system and the film was dismissed as the vile propaganda it was.

The Liberation of Auschwitz is quite different from the documentaries we have reviewed so far. It opens with an intertitle informing viewers that it contains *all* of the footage taken by Soviet cameramen when the Soviet Army liberated it on January 27, 1945. Moreover, it is a film with no score, noting, "In the interest of preserving the original character of this material, even the most shocking pictures have been left unedited, and neither sound nor music has been added." (I suspect that the availability of the Soviet footage was enabled by the collapse of the Soviet system.)

After a brief introduction by famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, the narrator shows us the location of Auschwitz, the biggest of all the camps, and we see a picture of Alexander Vorontsov, the man who took much of the footage we are about to see. He is the only member still alive of the team of Soviet cameramen who filmed the liberation. Vorontsov, who helped put the footage in order, narrates his experiences.

As the Soviet Army approached the camp complex (Auschwitz consisted of several large camps integrated around an industrial center), the SS forced healthier prisoners to march to other camps farther west. Thousands died along the way due to the harsh winter conditions or by being shot.

The first shots the Soviet camera crew took of the camp complex were from the air, showing how vast it was. We see row after row of barracks. The narrator points out that the camps held 100,000 or

more prisoners at a time, with more arriving on a two-week cycle to replace those who would be exterminated when they became too feeble to work. We also see the IG Farben factory complex, which had been moved from Germany to the east to make it safer from Allied bombers.

We then view electric fences, with gaunt and somber prisoners standing by. Vorontsov recounts how a Soviet government delegation arrived at the camp complex two days later to inspect the camp. It took a while for the full nature of the extermination system to be understood, because the SS had destroyed the crematoria, but the camp plans were discovered and disclosed the truth.

The film shows other things discovered by Soviet soldiers, including prisoners freezing to death (the SS had cut the power to the camp when they left). We view piles of suitcases that have been taken from the prisoners; massive heaps of clothes and shoes; mounds of eyeglasses, gold teeth, shaving utensils, and even shoe-horns; and stacks of Jewish prayer shawls.⁴ All of this was confiscated from the incoming prisoners. SS records reveal that hundreds of millions of Reich marks had been stolen from the inmates.

The narrator notes that the Jews were “by far” the most numerous of the victims and that “almost without exception” Jewish children had been gassed. This was clear contemporaneous acknowledgement that the main target of the Holocaust was precisely the Jewish people.

Next up is footage of Soviet attorneys recording the testimony of prisoners for later use in war-crime trials. We hear some of that testimony, which includes pictures of children showing numbers tattooed upon them and survivors telling us of what they endured.

The film ends on an interesting note. The narrator states that the Soviet film crew was originally instructed to stage a brief (propaganda) film of the liberation, using now recuperated freed prisoners to recreate the liberation, cheering lustily the Soviet troops. We see scenes of this film. However, the Soviets—not particularly averse to using their own propaganda movies—decided against using this footage, because the images “did not correspond to the bleak reality of January 27th [1945].”

⁴ Historian Götz Aly has argued persuasively that, as a matter of state policy, the Nazi regime paid for much of its war effort by the confiscation of Jewish assets. He argues this in his *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008). For a review of this book, see Gary Jason, “Buying Genocide, Part 2,” *Liberty*, August 14, 2017.

The Liberation of Majdanek is about the Soviet freeing of Majdanek, the concentration camp near the medieval Polish town of Lublin that was opened by the SS in October 1941. The first batch of prisoners were Soviet POWs. By December of 1941, the SS sent many of Lublin's Jews to the camp. Very quickly the SS introduced gas chambers to the camp. Throughout its three-year existence, the camp housed mainly Polish Jews.

The film shows us footage of Soviet tanks and Polish troops entering Lublin, which was the first Polish city to be liberated by the Soviet Army: "The joy and enthusiasm and the cheers as well were genuine." We see the layout of the camp, including gas chambers and crematoria. The narrator points out that, late in the war, Himmler ordered other camps to destroy all records of the mass killings by exhuming all corpses from mass graves, cremating all bodies, then blowing up the gas chambers and crematoria, and burning the camp records of the killings. The rapid advance of the Soviets, though, led to the capture of the camp intact, allowing humanity to witness the German genocide machinery.

The film cuts to scenes of Soviet POWs who have been captured by the Nazis during the Nazi attack on Russia (June 22, 1941). The narrator notes that "hundreds of thousands of soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans in the first months of the war." Himmler got permission from the German Army high command to put several hundred thousand POWs to work to help the German war economy in SS factories.

We next see a still of famous Soviet director Roman Karmen and Polish cameraman Adolf Forbert. He shot the film of the liberation of the camp, including the 480 Soviet POWs and 180 Polish political prisoners who remained in the camp after the SS removed the other prisoners in advance of the camp's liberation by the Soviets. The narrator points out that Majdanek was primarily a forced labor camp, but it repeatedly sent out large numbers of prisoners to the extermination camps.

The film cuts to a group of high Soviet Army officers being given a tour of the camp. The narrator points out that General Nicolai ordered his troops "to visit the camp before going to the front in order that they might see with their own eyes the scale and the horror of the extermination camp."⁵

⁵ See "Nicolai Bulganin," Wikipedia, accessed online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolai_Bulganin.

The film shifts to footage from a rare SS training film showing an SS round-up, as the narrator sarcastically notes that it doesn't show the SS shooting victims. Especially telling is the testimony from the highest SS officer captured there, who identifies the gas used as Zyklon. When asked, "Do you think that you as an SS who worked here in the camp are responsible for these mass murders?" he curtly replies, "No." To the question whether he knew that French, Belgians, and Poles were exterminated, he replies, "Yes, Jews, I know, I have heard this." To the question, "So do all Germans disregard all the rules of warfare in this camp?" he surreally responds, "The people were mostly Jews, not prisoners of war. . . . I am not a sadist I never beat anyone I am far too well educated for that!"

We now see scenes of the Soviet committee set up to investigate the crimes at Majdanek, including those of Polish and Soviet doctors and professors. The head of the committee tells the journalists that two million people were killed at the camp during its existence. One of the committee members adds that a field of fifty acres was fertilized with human ashes.

The film ends with a trial. Six defendants are led to the courthouse, with Polish troops holding back the angry crowd to keep the war criminals from being lynched. The men—four SS men and two Kapos—are on display as the trial opens. The narrator notes that those chiefly responsible had at first escaped, but they were later caught and executed. We see the charges read and hear the testimony of the witnesses about the brutalities committed in the camp. One of the witnesses summarizes the methods of Majdanek murder: beating, hanging, shooting, drowning, gassing, starvation, and lethal injection. The prosecutors sum up, with one striking a note of German collective guilt when he argues that at least half a million Germans "were all harnessed to the monolithic machinery of extermination." The other prosecutor urges, "In the name of peace and happiness, purchased with the blood of millions of victims, I demand the death penalty for them all!" The judge sentences five of them to death by hanging, adding another note of collective guilt: "This punishment is directed at the entire German people."

The narrator notes that this was only the first Majdanek trial. Of the thousands of SS guards and Kapos who served at the camp, only 107 were put on trial by the Polish and 8 by the Allied courts. One generation later, a second Majdanek trial took place in 1975: "It took six years to pass sentences on 8 SS guards."

3. Claude Lanzmann's Masterful Work

In the 1980s, after seeing an American television series on the Holocaust become a surprise hit in Germany,⁶ writer and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann set out to do his own documentary. He was born in 1925 to an émigré Jewish family in France and joined the Resistance at age 17. Lanzmann chose to interview surviving witnesses in depth. The result is the superb documentary *Shoah* and several spinoff documentaries.⁷

Shoah was highly regarded, though not universally so, when it was released. Roger Ebert says that it was “one of noblest films ever made,” adding that it was in a class by itself: “It is not a documentary, not journalism, not propaganda, not political. It is an act of witness.” It won the 1985 New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Documentary and a Special Award from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. However, Pauline Kael dismissed it as “exhausting.”⁸ In retrospect, there is little doubt as to the excellence of *Shoah*. The British Film Institute rates it the second greatest documentary ever made and, according to Wikipedia, it is “broadly considered to be the foremost film on the subject.”⁹

Shoah differs from all of the other documentaries discussed in this article in that it contains *no* archival footage whatsoever. It contains contemporaneous footage of the remains of the concentration camps along with extended interviews of those who were victims of or otherwise involved in the concentration camp system. Lanzmann also includes a notable interview with Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, who discusses the key role that propaganda played in intensifying hatred of the Jews.

⁶ The *Holocaust* miniseries first appeared in the United States in 1978.

⁷ *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 1985); *A Visitor from the Living*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 1997); *Sobibor: 14 October, 1943 4pm*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 2001); *The Karski Report*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 2010); *The Last of the Unjust*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 2013).

⁸ “Shoah,” Wikipedia, accessed online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoah_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoah_(film)).

⁹ “Claude Lanzmann,” Wikipedia, accessed online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Lanzmann.

Shoah runs at nine-and-a-half hours, with its footage taken from over 350 hours of interviews spread over fourteen countries. *Shoah* focuses on four subjects: Chelmo, a killing camp that was the first to use mobile gas vans to commit the murders; the death camp Treblinka; the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau; and the Warsaw ghetto.

Lanzmann, who wrote and directed the film, personally conducted the interviews. For Lanzmann, oral history takes primacy over written history. His method is to ask for details of what the interviewee saw or did, letting the viewer decide for himself the truth. He faced a number of difficulties in making the film. It took over eleven years to make and experienced financial problems, in part from locating so many participants and traveling to so many countries. Some of the German interviewees who were participants in the Nazi regime's activities refused to be filmed, so Lanzmann's crew used hidden cameras and remote filming to get that footage.

Testimony on Chelmo is provided by two survivors, Simon Srebnik and Mordechai Podchlebnik. Srebnik survived by singing military songs for the Germans. Lanzmann also secretly filmed a German security guard, who describes how the camp functioned, as well as a former Nazi railroad traffic engineer, who feigns ignorance about just what his trains were transporting.

Testimony on Treblinka is given by Abraham Bomba, who survived because he was a barber. In a moving scene, he recounts how another camp barber saw Bomba's wife and sister in the anteroom to the gas chamber. Testimony is also recorded from another survivor, Richard Glazer, along with SS officer Franz Suchomel, who details how the gas chambers were designed. Also interviewed is Henryk Gawkowski, a Pole who drove one of the transport trains while blunting his feelings with vodka.

Testimony on Auschwitz is given by Rudolf Vrba and Filip Muller. Vrba was one of the few to escape the camp. Muller was given the task of pulling the stiffened bodies out of the gas chambers and putting them in the crematoria.

Finally, testimony on the Warsaw Ghetto is given primarily by Jan Karski and Franz Grassler. Karski (about whom more below) was a Polish Catholic resistance fighter who went to the Ghetto and then Auschwitz to see for himself the evils therein. Grassler was one of the Nazi administrators who coordinated with the Jewish Elders allegedly in charge of the Ghetto.

Lanzmann was quite open about one theme that recurs in many of the scenes in the film. He told one French magazine that he intended his documentary to be an indictment of Poland's complicity in the Holocaust. This comes across especially clearly in one scene, where he interviews a group of older Poles about their feelings at seeing trainloads of Jews pass through the town and never return. One of the older women asserts that people who deny the divinity of Christ will face bad ends. (I will return below to this point.)

Years after releasing *Shoah*, Lanzmann used his extensive footage to produce four other documentaries: *A Visitor from the Living*, *Sobibor*, *The Karski Report*, and *The Last of the Unjust*. Each of these subsequent documentaries is focused on the interview of one person.

A Visitor from the Living shows Lanzmann's methodical interview style to its best effect. The interviewee here was Maurice Rossel, none other than the Swiss inspector sent by the International Committee of the Red Cross, who visited the "Potemkin camp" Theresienstadt in 1944. Rossel subsequently gave the camp a glowing review, which the Nazis then used for propaganda purposes. This interview examines the character of the man and finds it wanting.

Lanzmann opens the film by telling us about Theresienstadt and he thanks Rossel for permitting them to use the twenty-year-old footage. In his permission letter, Rossel, at that point quite elderly, says, "Be lenient, don't make me look too ridiculous." Lanzmann cagily replies, "I did not try to." Lanzmann didn't have to make Rossel appear ridiculous, since Rossel did it to himself.

What Lanzmann's polite but probing questions reveal is not so much an evil man but an insensitive man—or perhaps an intentionally blind one. Rossel tells us about the cozy atmosphere he found as a young man in Berlin during the war. He also says that in an earlier visit he made to Auschwitz, where the Nazis refused to show him the crematoria, he saw the inmates walking around with dazed gazes. Any aware person would have more than suspected that the inmates were terrified into sheer shock and that the Nazis were covering up mass murder.

While discussing his visit to Theresienstadt, Rossel describes the inmates as being privileged enough to get special treatment by the Nazis. He also says that he found the inmates unpleasant in their "passivity" or, as he put it, "that servility I couldn't stomach." It never occurred to him that the prisoners were frightened and with good reason, for 5,000 of them had been sent to their deaths just before Rossel's "inspection" so that the camp would appear uncrowded. That

he could speak this way many years *after* the truth of the Holocaust and the role Theresienstadt played in it reveals him to be a complete fool.

Sobibor: 14 October, 1943 4pm is devoted to the most successful escape attempt during the Holocaust. This film is quite different from all of the others in that it testifies to a successful uprising by the inmates of one of the concentration camps.

Lanzmann reconstructs the events through the recollections of a survivor, Yehuda Lerner. Lerner had escaped from some other camps. After being recaptured, he arrived at Sobibor with an influx of other new prisoners. The camp commandant had chosen sixty physically fit prisoners to build out the camp. Among them was a former Soviet officer, Alexander Petchersky. Thus, unlike the other camps, this one had a cadre of men physically and mentally able to resist.

The prisoners planned their escape utilizing the German guards' tendency to stick to routine. At exactly 4:00 p.m. on October 14, 1943, some of the SS guards were lured to the storehouses, killed by the prisoners armed with knives and hatchets, and their weapons seized. The prisoners killed most of the guards and the entire camp of 600 prisoners fled. The camp's machine guns and surrounding mine fields killed half of the prisoners, but the rest made it to the woods. Of these, most were killed or recaptured. Only fifty survived to the end of the war. After the uprising, the Germans plowed under the camp. No trace was left of the camp which killed about 167,000 between May 1942 and October 1943.¹⁰

The Karski Report contains Lanzmann's interview with a Polish resistance fighter, Jan Karski (the *nom de guerre* of Jan Koziński). Karski's dignified, even regal interview was one of the best. At the time of the interview (1985), Karski was a professor at Georgetown University, where he taught for forty years. He emigrated to America after World War II, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1954. The U.S. posthumously awarded Karski the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

During the war, Karski—at great risk to his life—investigated the horrible conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto and the Belzec death

¹⁰ See "Sobibor," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed online at: <https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/sobibor-uprising>.

camp. In 1942, he wrote a report, entitled “The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland,” which he smuggled out of Poland on microfilm. In 1943, Karski reported his findings first in Britain to the Polish Prime Minister in exile, the leaders of Britain’s major parties, its Foreign Secretary, and eminent intellectual Arthur Koestler. Nothing resulted. Karski then travelled to the U.S., where he met with Felix Frankfurter, Cordell Hull, OSS Chief William Donovan, Rabbi Stephen Wise, leaders of the major media, the Catholic Church, the Hollywood film industry, and even Franklin Roosevelt. Again, nothing came of it. At least Lanzmann’s documentary finally honors Karski’s work.

The most recent Lanzmann production is *The Last of the Unjust*. The footage is from Lanzmann’s extended interview in 1975 with Rabbi Benjamin Murmelstein, who was interviewed for *Shoah* but wasn’t included in that documentary.

The focus of this film is the use by the Nazis of Theresienstadt as the “model ghetto” for propaganda. As we saw earlier with Von Zur Muhlen’s film, to help the deception succeed (domestically and later for foreign consumption), the Nazis—in particular, Eichmann—set up a Jewish Council as titular government of the Theresienstadt ghetto/concentration camp. The Jewish Council was headed by a president called “Elder of the Jews.” The Council had three Elders, of which Murmelstein was the last (the first two were killed by the Nazis during the war). For about seven years (from 1938 until the end of the Nazi Regime in 1945), Murmelstein played a kind of chess game with Eichmann, with the spoils being the lives of Jews. The documentary rightly focuses not so much on Theresienstadt as on the two competing players. The framing issue of the film is whether Murmelstein was an opportunistic collaborator—as some Jews accused him of being¹¹—or a wily foe who succeeded in saving some (if not many) Jewish lives—as he clearly believes.

Regarding Eichmann, the portrait that emerges from this film is far from a case of “banal evil,” as Hannah Arendt put it.¹²

¹¹ Murmelstein was arrested in Czechoslovakia after the war for collaboration with the Nazis, but he was acquitted of all charges. Many Jews considered him a collaborator, yet he was never called to testify in the trial of Eichmann in Israel, even though he was uniquely close to Eichmann.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

Murmelstein's testimony makes it clear that Eichmann was completely aware of and engaged in the ongoing total war with the Jewish people. In fact, he was a vicious, clever psychopath who delighted in tormenting, deceiving, and killing Jews. He was Satan incarnate—indeed, the word Murmelstein chose for Eichmann was “a demon.” To apply the term “banal” to Satan is surely a category error if ever there was one.

Also intriguing is the portrait of Murmelstein himself. He first worked with Eichmann in Vienna as a rabbi who helped expedite the emigration of 120,000 Jews (albeit with their assets stripped along the way). Ironically, he taught Eichmann about Jewish culture and religion. Lanzmann's interview focuses mostly on Murmelstein's role as the last of the three Jewish Elders at Theresienstadt. His job was to organize camp life, which was a tough job, considering the role of the camp was to appear as a model camp when it in fact served the goal of exterminating the Jews. Murmelstein says the prisoners didn't know about the gas chambers at Auschwitz, where most of them wound up. He attributes his personal survival and that of at least some of the prisoners to his ability to keep telling the story of Theresienstadt as a haven for Jews.

Murmelstein says, “An Elder of the Jews can be condemned. But he can't be judged, because one cannot take his place.”¹³ This may on the surface sound compelling, but in reality this is glib. Of course, Murmelstein can be judged. He worked closely with Eichmann from 1938 until the end of the war, willingly helping Eichmann resettle Jews, knowing that most would be stripped of their assets and many killed. Whether he deliberately did this surreptitiously to save Jewish lives or was just intrigued by the thrill of dealing with Eichmann on a personal basis, cannot be known with certainty. The way you answer that question determines your judgment of Murmelstein.

4. Are These Films Deceptive Propaganda?

An accusation occasionally made is that these documentaries are in fact themselves propaganda movies. Making them is at worst on a par with the propaganda movies produced by the Nazis themselves. Are these documentaries propaganda, in the pejorative sense of being deceptive? Much of the answer depends on how you define the term. I

¹³ Godfrey Cheshire, “The Last of the Unjust,” Roger Ebert.com, accessed online at: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-last-of-the-unjust-2013>.

will extend an analysis that I developed in an earlier article.¹⁴ I suggest that there are six criteria by which we judge whether a case of marketing or propaganda falls on the scale from reasonable to deceptive: transparency of intention, message based upon evidence (as opposed to mere repetition of the message), rationality of audience, logicity of appeal (including especially avoidance of irrelevant emotional manipulation), truthfulness of message; and the absence of coercion.

Nazi propaganda movies typically egregiously violated one or more of these criteria. They were often presented as pure entertainment, but in fact contained elements of Nazi ideology. They were often targeted at children, with the intention of getting them to feel loyalty to the Nazi Party at an early age. They used illogical devices, such as false analogies (e.g., implicitly comparing British internment camps in the Boer War with Nazi concentration camps) or had irrelevant emotional appeals (e.g., arousing nationalistic identity to sell imperialistic wars). They routinely contained messages that were false or outright lies (e.g., the claim that Germany didn't lose World War I on the battlefield, but because it was betrayed by Jews). They also involved coercion (e.g., short films shown at theaters reminded viewers of the harsh punishment for possessing radios capable of receiving Allied programming).

However, most of the documentaries described above are free of these flaws. They are all presented as documentaries about the Holocaust, that is, films visually and orally documenting the mass murders of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp system or the use of that camp system to commit the near total genocide of European Jewry. They are intended for adult audiences, since most come with disclaimers warning the viewer of the disturbing images contained therein. They are mainly free of logical fallacies, such as hasty generalization, by presenting extensive samples of the torture and mass murder rampant in that system. Von Zur Muhlen's documentary on Auschwitz even contains *all* extant footage taken by the liberators. Regarding the truthfulness of the message, despite the groundless claims of Holocaust deniers, I would argue that these films' footage document the claim that the Nazis committed genocide of the Jews and committed other targeted mass murders.

¹⁴ Gary James Jason, "Film and Propaganda I: The Lessons of the Nazi Film Industry," *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), pp. 203-19; see esp. pp. 217-19.

Moreover, all are free of irrelevant emotional manipulation, though this might seem disputable. Are the graphic scenes, which surely arouse horror, pity, and anger, truly relevant? I would reply that the issue at hand is twofold: Did the Nazis commit targeted mass murder and genocide using this camp system? Did the Nazis inflict deliberate cruelty? Presenting actual footage showing in detail what was done to the victims is obviously relevant for answering such questions. In other words, an accurate and effective documentary of horrific events may well have horrific scenes, without such inclusion being irrelevant or manipulative.

Generally speaking, it would be mistaken to call these documentaries “propaganda films.” However, three of them are not so easy to dismiss as being deceptively propagandistic.

First, the Wilder documentary is open for criticism on this count. For that film pushes the notion of collective guilt, which seems to me to be manifestly false (as I argue above). The fact that the SS and the Nazi regime generally (especially using Theresienstadt) tried to deceive its own as well as European citizens that the camps were benign, is yet another reason to doubt the notion that the German people were collectively guilty for the Holocaust. In that regard, *but only in that regard*, the film is not truthfully based. For this reason, I think it is fair to categorize the Wilder film as to some degree deceptive propaganda.

Second, Von Zur Muhlen’s documentary *The Liberation of Majdanek* clearly draws footage of the event from Soviet director and cameraman Roman Karmen. The film doesn’t say exactly where this footage is from or how it was obtained. In particular, we do not know whether it is footage from the Russian archives or selected portions of Karmen’s own 1946 documentary about the Nuremberg trials, *Judgment of the Peoples*. Karmen was a committed Soviet propaganda filmmaker. He has been called “the USSR’s equivalent to Leni Riefenstahl.”¹⁵ There seem to me several elements of propaganda present in the film.

To begin with, this film features footage of General Nikolai Bulganin showing his outrage at the work of the SS. However, the film does not mention that Bulganin, a life-long member of the Soviet government, got his start in the Cheka (serving from 1918 to 1922). The Cheka was the state secret political police, the Soviet equivalent of

¹⁵ See “Roman Karmen,” Wikipedia, accessed online at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Karmen.

the Gestapo, and a likely model for it. This would suggest that the outrage he expresses may be feigned. Moreover, like Wilder's film, the end of the film pushes collective guilt, which is expressed overtly in the lines of the closing prosecutor and the judge.

Most troublesome is the theme presented throughout the film (which I am sure is Karmen's, not Von Zur Muhlen's, presentation) that the independent Polish forces worked alongside the Soviet army to liberate not just the Majdanek concentration camp, but rather, all of Poland. This is a profound lie. The Soviet intention was not the liberation of Poland, but the transfer of its sovereignty from Nazi to Soviet control. Several historical events show this. Consider first the Molotov-Von Ribbentrop Pact.¹⁶ This treaty (concluded in 1939), divided Poland between the Nazi and Soviet regimes. This allowed the Nazis to turn their attention to Western Europe. Next consider the Katyn Forest massacre.¹⁷ The Soviets mass murdered nearly 22,000 captured Polish officers, so that they could not mount any resistance to the Soviet inclusion of Poland in its empire after the Nazi defeat. While this film on Majdanek truly documents the crimes of the Nazis there, it unfortunately blends in elements of Soviet propaganda.

Third, and very troubling, is Lanzmann's message in *Shoah* that the Poles were generally supportive of the Nazi effort to annihilate the Jewish people. Nobody denies that many Poles had some degree of anti-Semitism, but so did many other Europeans (and many Americans) for that matter. When the film was released in Poland, it caused a firestorm of protest. The Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland viewed the film as political provocation and Polish intellectuals almost uniformly rejected the film.¹⁸ For example, Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski—himself an Auschwitz survivor and an honorary citizen of Israel—was angry that the film ignored the many (non-Jewish) Poles who aided the Jews. Jan Karski (discussed

¹⁶ See "German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed online at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/German-Soviet-Nonaggression-Pact>.

¹⁷ Benjamin Fischer, "The Katyn Controversy: Stalin's Killing Field," U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, accessed online at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art6.html>.

¹⁸ See "Shoah," Wikipedia, accessed online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoah_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoah_(film)).

above), who was non-Jewish but risked his life to bring reliable information on the mass murder to the major Allied leaders, also condemned the film as tendentious. Another Polish intellectual, Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski, a dissident against the then-ruling Communist government, asked: “Did the Poles live in peace, quietly plowing farmers’ fields with their backs turned on the long fuming chimneys of death-camp crematoria? Or, were they exterminated along with the Jews as subhuman?” He reminds us that Nazi ideology characterized all Slavs as inferior, fit only to be slaves, and many Christian Poles were killed.

It should be noted here that Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, has a page listing the Righteous Among the Nations, that is, non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from the killing camps. This included hiding Jews on one’s property, providing false papers and identities, and assisting Jews to escape. On the page listing the number of people honored by country, the country with the most such individuals is Poland, with 6,706 Poles listed as being among the Righteous, 20% higher than the next highest country (the Netherlands, at 5,595). As the site notes, in helping Jews, a person risked severe punishment, which was harsher for Eastern than Western Europeans: not just their own deaths, but those of their families as well.¹⁹

5. The Tools of Documentary Film and How They Are Employed

I will conclude by briefly addressing how the makers of the best Holocaust/Shoah documentaries had four tools at their disposal, which they used in different measures. The first tool is using archival footage, that is, the actual film footage of the concentration camps right after their liberation by the Americans and Soviets. There have been other genocides (i.e., mass killings targeting groups of some identity or other) throughout human history, but that perpetrated by the Nazis was arguably the most heinous and is the first for which we have extensive actual footage. I suspect that the reason the Russians have been able to deny the mass killings that Russia inflicted on Ukraine in the early 1930s and the Turks have been able to deny the mass killings Turkey inflicted on the Armenians in 1914-1923, is that there is little photographic evidence of the events to document those atrocities. It is

¹⁹ See “About the Righteous,” Yad Vashem, accessed online at: <http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-righteous>.

likely that one reason the Karski report was disbelieved is that he had no film to accompany it.

The second tool is the use of retrospective testimony by participants in the events, including prisoners, guards, bureaucrats, resistance fighters, and so on. As I noted in Part I, a guard being interrogated at the time a camp is liberated doesn't have the same grasp of what he participated in as he likely does decades later. This raises an even bigger problem with using participant testimony—especially with films such as Wilder's and Lanzmann's—to generalize about events. The problem is that such testimony lends itself to the fallacy of hasty generalization: generalizing about a large group based on a sample either too small or biased in some way. Finding a few Poles who still exhibit overt anti-Semitism hardly suffices to support the claim that Polish anti-Semitism facilitated the Nazi atrocities. Similarly, finding some Germans who exhibit callousness regarding German atrocities hardly supports the notion of general guilt, much less of collective guilt.

The third tool is the use of contemporary footage of old sites along with narrator commentary. This increases the power of the film. In Part I, I pointed in this regard to the Resnais film. Here, I would point to Lanzmann's brilliant work.

The fourth tool is what I called "narrative focus," meaning clarity and consistency about the message of the film. I will expand on this last point. There are various messages that these films aim to convey; the types of tool used are tied to that message. I will comment briefly on the documentaries under analysis in this article as well as my earlier "Memorializing Genocide I" in relation to narrative focus.

The Steven's film, using footage taken by the (American) Army Signal Corps, had one task, but it was a vital one: to show the existence and extent of the death camp system and the Holocaust it committed. This was vital, because in World War I, British and American propaganda falsely accused the Germans of war crimes. This was a coherent message and the footage proved it beyond rational doubt, so the first and fourth tools were effectively employed. By contrast, the Wilder film didn't have narrative focus. It didn't just want to establish the existence, nature, and extent of German atrocities. It also wanted to push the message of collective German guilt. It is difficult to imagine, though, what kind of footage could show *collective* guilt.

Turning now to the Thames Television's documentary on the genocide of the Jews, the footage shows the existence of mass killing.

It also shows clips from Nazi racial propaganda films to show that the chief target was the Jews and that this was a key feature of Nazi ideology.

Now let's consider Von Zur Muhlen's later two movies. Taken as once again establishing the depth of the Holocaust atrocities, they perform well. She used *all* extant Soviet film footage, which is an immense evidential addition to the American footage. Considering the existence of neo-Nazism and Holocaust denial, this is vitally important. However, to the extent she propagates the Soviet suggestion of collective German guilt, the footage doesn't work to support that claim.

The Resnais and Lanzmann documentaries show the power of the second and third tools to make it not only clear that the Holocaust happened, but also make us feel more deeply the emotional impact. Moreover, the four most recent Lanzmann documentaries, precisely because they show no archival footage, challenge us to use our minds to judge various participants. This is what all of us have to do if we sit on a jury: ascertain whether a witness is truthful. For that, we need to see him or her under questioning.

The films we have reviewed are not merely fascinating as cinema or as exemplars of how documentary films should be made. They have played and continue to play a crucial geopolitical role: they form bulwarks against the resurrection of fascism. Recent elections in Europe and elsewhere show the continuing allure of fascist ideology, with extreme nationalist parties gaining ground. But all of these parties take care not overtly to employ explicitly anti-Semitic rhetoric or to engage in Holocaust denialism. This is left to the alt-right fringe who dwell on the dark web.

The communist death camps were never filmed during their existence or after liberation, which makes it far easier to deny the communists' mass killing. If we had documentaries of the quality of the Holocaust documentaries showing the Soviet extermination of six million "kulaks" and the murders in the Gulag camps in China and the Soviet Union, there might be far fewer people professing Marxism today than there are.

