



*Hitler & Holocaust on the Screen: Perspectives and Challenges.* Dr. Bernhard Fulda, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge University, 04.03.2016.

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## Hitler & Holocaust on the Screen: Perspectives and Challenges

On 4 March 2016, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, welcomed scholars and filmmakers to discuss how Hitler's and others' roles in the Holocaust have been represented in scholarship and on the screen in the past, and how they ought to be represented going forward.

In a way, the surroundings almost seemed unfit for purpose; a group of renowned historians and filmmakers coming together in the Sidney Sussex Old Library – a beautiful eighteenth century building overlooking lush gardens on both sides – to discuss a tyrant's role in the murder of millions. On the other hand, being in the former college of another of history's great tyrants – Oliver Cromwell, whose portrait still adorns the wall of the dining hall – some might argue that this was a more than apt setting to consider Adolf Hitler's role in the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century.

At the centre of the discussion was a forthcoming TV mini series on Hitler; the aim being to explore the possibilities and limits of applying historical knowledge to the big and small screens, and what, if anything, the forthcoming production can learn from previous efforts to portray perpetrators' roles in the Holocaust.

Broken into three, thematically-structured panels, first it was up to the historians to explore the roles of different actors in the persecution and murder of the Jews. Fittingly, WOLFRAM PYTA (Stuttgart) began proceedings with an assessment of Hitler's role in the Judeocide. Like most Hitler biographers, Pyta argued that Hitler saw himself as both designer and executor of radical anti-

Semitism and was therefore the central figure behind the 'Final Solution'. Unlike most, however, he maintained that the best way to understand this is through a cultural history of the dictator's decision-making. In order to achieve this, we ought to focus less on what he wrote and more on what he said because, for Pyta, Hitler was a speech performer whose medium was the spoken word. In this sense, Pyta sees Hitler's Reichstag speech in January 1939, in which he 'prophesized' the extermination of the European Jews, as evidence of his decision to act towards a Final Solution to the Jewish Question.

ROBERT GERWARTH (Dublin) then took up the same question in relation to the leadership of the SS. Unlike Pyta, however, he explored the long-term role of anti-Semitism in SS decision making. Interestingly, Gerwarth showed how although Hitler, Himmler and Heydrich were the architects of the genocide, anti-Semitism did not characterise the latter two's thinking until later on. Indeed, Himmler's world view was defined more by homophobia and anti-bolshevism, at least until the mid-1930s. For this reason, he argued, the SS's interest in the Jews was at least partially strategic. Thus, the anti-Semitism for which both men were infamous was simultaneously a cause and consequence of the regime's assault on the Jews.

Moving beyond the decision makers, finally, NICK STARGARDT (Oxford) examined what 'ordinary' Germans knew about the Holocaust. Focusing on the interaction of discourse between top and bottom, he showed how some Nazi leaders wanted to discuss the Judeocide

openly, thus implicating the mass of Germans in the regime's crimes and in the hope that they would fight on as a result. One example of this was Himmler's 1943 Posen speech, in which he spoke frankly about the extermination of the Jews. In the end, however, such candidness was rare, with the regime eventually deciding against discussing the genocide openly. As for the population in general, Stargardt sees the firebombing of Hamburg in 1943 as key in initiating a broad public discourse on the Judeocide. Thereafter, he argues, Germans began to piece together the scattered information they received up to that point, viewing allied attacks as revenge for what was being done to the Jews.

A lively discussion then followed, with a number of people taking issue with Wolfram Pyta's thesis. Whilst praising the idea of a decision-making culture, RICHARD EVANS (Cambridge) wondered whether it was actually possible to discern such a thing given the haphazard manner in which decisions were reached during the Third Reich. BRENDAN SIMMS (Cambridge), moreover, took issue with Pyta's privileging of Hitler's speeches over the spoken word, arguing that Hitler also saw himself as a *Schriftsteller*; a point which Pyta contested because even *Mein Kampf* was written by accident. Gerwarth and MOSHE ZIMMERMANN (Jerusalem), finally, questioned Pyta's overreliance on Hitler's infamous Reichstag speech. Whereas Gerwarth pointed to the fact that the systematic murder of the Jews did not begin until almost three years after the speech, Zimmerman argued that people spoke like this long before the advent of the Third Reich. Although he essentially agreed with this point, Nick Stargardt pointed out that whilst the language may have been the same, the environment in which it was interpreted was radically different; a key factor that helps explain the movement from the metaphorical to the literal.

The second panel moved more towards the topic at hand, focusing on how Hitler and the Holocaust have been represented on screen in the past. Interestingly, the two have rarely featured on the screen at the same time. In itself, this points to the value of the forthcoming UFA production. But it is also arguably indicative of a fear in Germany that too close a focus on Hitler might decrease the critical inspection of 'ordinary' Germans' roles in the Holocaust, thus heralding a return to the victimhood and collective amnesia of the immediate post-war period.

Moshe Zimmerman opened proceedings by posing the question; is the Hitler we see on the screen real or artificial? For the first panellist, MARTIN RUEHL (Cam-

bridge), it is the latter; our present image of Hitler is still shaped by the one presented during the Third Reich. Thanks largely to the work of Heinrich Hoffmann - Hitler's personal photographer - and the film director Leni Riefenstahl, Germans were presented with an almost godlike image of their leader. Although a number of films have looked to demystify the mythical Hitler, Ruehl maintained that, in one form or other, this image persists wherever and whenever Hitler appears on screen. Unsurprisingly, the paper concluded with a brief discussion of arguably the most well-known Hitler image; that presented in the film *Der Untergang*. Addressing specifically those who criticised the film for somehow historicising Hitler, Ruehl argued that this is a perfectly natural and normal process of normalisation. 'Hitler was, after, all human'. And this captures the problem facing filmmakers perfectly. On the one hand, they are required to break through the propaganda image that dominates many cinematic representations of the man. When they attempt to humanise him, however, they are often accused of historicization. Before the first scenes are even shot, the UFA filmmakers already find themselves on shaky ground.

Moving away from Hitler's person, AXEL BANGERT (Berlin) then looked at how the decision-making process behind the Holocaust has been presented in German film. Interestingly, such movies are rare. And when they do appear, Hitler is only vaguely present. *Aus einem deutschen Leben*, a 1977 biopic loosely based on the life and career of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höß, and *Die Wannseekonferenz*, a dramatization of the infamous 1942 meeting called by Reinhard Heydrich to discuss the Final Solution, are cases in point. Whereas the former portrays Höß's decision to commit mass murder as being heavily influenced by German military culture, in the latter the decision-making process is represented by highlighting the ease with which the protagonists discussed genocide, thus shedding light on the perceived normality of the exercise to the Nazis.

FRANK BÄSCH (Potsdam), finally, talked about the relationship between films and research, and challenged the traditional view that filmmakers only learn from scholarship. Evidenced by the role of film in reintroducing Hitler to a popular audience in the 1970s, film and documentary makers inspire researchers, whether they know it or not, to examine complex historical themes in greater detail. More than that, however, as a medium, 'film offers possibilities for exploration that need to be explored'.

In reference to the differences between scholarship and film as modes of exploration, Moshe Zimmermann argued that the question driving such movies is not, then, how is Hitler represented, but rather what is the desired effect? Wolfram Pyta, conversely, argued that film needs to be treated as hybrid form – almost like a historical novel – whilst Richard Evans and Thomas Weber debated the often fraught relationship between filmmakers and their historical consultants. The implication here being that, in the end, the latter’s aim is to entertain and, increasingly, to make money.

In the end, it fell to the film’s historical consultants to outline their vision for the forthcoming project. After Jonathan Steinberg outlined the bureaucratic nature of the Nazi murder apparatus, Thomas Weber – upon whose book, *Hitler’s erster Krieg*, the production is partly based – showed how the biopic will focus on four main protagonists; Hitler’s corporal during the First World War, Hugo Guttman, his direct superior in the *Reichswehr* after 1918, Karl Mayr, his personal adjutant, Fritz Wiedemann and, of course, Hitler himself. Such an approach, they believe, will not only allow them to show Hitler’s personal evolution, but also, and more importantly, how he and his actions were perceived by those around him; although they conceded that this might lead to the accusation that they failed to capture the ‘real’ Hitler.

Perhaps an indicator of what is to come following the film’s release, this approach drew harsh criticism from the audience. Whereas Moshe Zimmermann argued that the focus on persons other than Hitler might trivialize his role in the Holocaust, Richard Evans was worried that it could become an exercise in exculpation; as was the case, he believed, with another recent TV production, *Unsere Mütter unsere Väter*. Others were concerned that the project might lose sight of Hitler’s humanity; in the sense that he was a man, not a monster. Pyta, therefore, asked whether there should be more space for ambivalent factors such as his love of music, whilst BERNHARD FULDA (Cambridge) wondered how filmmakers would decide whether or not to include known jokes by Hitler. In a similar vein, Nick Stargardt said that people were looking for Hitler’s inner personality – something that most biographies of the man have failed to deliver. MARION KANT (Cambridge), finally, criticised the film’s typically Hollywood narrative style, and asked whether they had considered another approach. In the end, however, Niki Stein stressed that it was impossible to make such a film without identifying with the character on some level. The best they can hope for, he concluded, was to show the evolving nature of Hitler’s character; from a ‘stray dog

to world conqueror’.

In his closing statement, Bernhard Fulda talked about the filmmakers’ fear of getting things wrong. And if the symposium showed us anything, it was that the forthcoming project will unlikely please everyone. Much of this is explained by the fact that, as mediums, the inherent aims of scholarship and filmmaking will invariably diverge at some point because the latter is not bound by the same code as the former. Thus, in a way, the most surprising thing about the symposium was not what was said but what was not said. For nobody dared to ask what, if anything, the filmmakers intended to fictionalise about Hitler. The nature of their medium means that that they certainly have the artistic licence to do so. But the nature of the project, and the fact that Germany is its primary market, suggests that they are unlikely to make much use of this. Hitler is arguably more present in Germany today than at any point since 1945. They may, indeed, get him ‘wrong’, but it certainly won’t be for lack of trying. Thus, whatever this film achieves, it cannot even hope to provide the last word on Hitler. Nor will it likely please everyone. In this vein, JUDITH VORNBERG (London) of the *New Statesman* posed the final question of the symposium. Will we, she asked, ever arrive at a complete image of Hitler? ‘Probably not’, Thomas Weber replied. ‘The more interesting question, however, is will people ever stop being interested?’

#### **Konferenzübersicht:**

Opening Words: Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge)

*Panel 1: Hitler and the Judeocide: the State of Research*  
Chair: Sir Richard J. Evans (Cambridge)

Wolfram Pyta (Stuttgart): Reflections on Hitler’s decision-making culture

Robert Gerwarth (Dublin): Hitler and the SS Architects of Genocide

Nick Stargardt (Oxford): Whose Holocaust? German War-Time Conversations on Genocide

*Panel 2: Hitler and the Holocaust on Screen*  
Chair: Moshe Zimmermann (Jerusalem)

Martin Ruehl (Cambridge): Hitler Films – a Brief Survey

Axel Bangert (NYU Berlin): Visualising Motives for Mass Murder

Frank BÄrjoch (ZZF Potsdam): One-Way Road? Scholarly Knowledge and Audiovisual Representations of the Third Reich

*Panel 3: Concept and Challenges of the Planned UFA*    Bureaucracy  
*Fiction / Beta Film Production: Hitler*                    Thomas Weber (Aberdeen) & Niki Stein: Behind the  
Chair: Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge)                    Scenes: Crafting Hitler  
Jonathan Steinberg (UPenn): âMass Murder and its    Closing Words: Bernhard Fulda

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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