

French TV documentary: “Shoah by Shooting—SS Death Squads in Ukraine”

By Clara Weiss
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Earlier this year, the 2008 French television documentary “Shoah by Shooting—SS Death Squads in Ukraine,” by Romain Icard, was released on DVD with German subtitles by Absolut Medien. The documentary describes the journey of the French Catholic priest Patrick Desbois through Ukraine in his search for the mass graves of some 1.5 million murdered Jews.

The release of the DVD coincides with the German- and US-backed coup in Kiev that brought to power an extreme right-wing regime that includes neo-Nazi forces. The documentary underscores the criminal character of a policy of relying on fascistic forces.

The Nazis occupied Ukraine in the summer of 1941 and were expelled by the Red Army two-and-a-half years later. During the period of German occupation, the war and the mass murders carried out by the Nazis and their Ukrainian collaborators took the lives of between five and eight million people. Another one million Ukrainians were deported to Germany to serve as forced laborers. The Soviet Republic was plundered and savaged. Hitler planned to resettle 20 million Germans on the territory of Ukraine.

At the time of the attack on the Soviet Union, the Nazi leadership had already decided on the annihilation of European Jewry. The systematic murder of the Jews became an integral part of the occupation.

In Lithuania, the Nazis and their collaborators liquidated over 90 percent of the Jewish population. In Belarus, the Nazis murdered a quarter of the total population—800,000 people—including more than 90 percent of all Jews. In Ukraine, an estimated 1.5 million Jews were murdered—over half of the total Jewish population of 2.7 million.

As the director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum explains in the documentary, “Ukraine is and will remain a vast cemetery.”

The Catholic Church played an important role in supporting the Hitler regime, together with other fascist regimes in Europe. Through its backing for Desbois’ work, the Vatican sought to erase the traces of its crimes. Nevertheless, the research carried out by Desbois, whose own father was held as a French prisoner of war in Ukraine and later informed his son of what he had seen of the Holocaust, is of great importance. Many crimes of the Nazis in Eastern Europe have not been fully explored and the sites of most of the mass graves in Ukraine were unknown until Desbois’ investigations.

Through systematic interviews, beginning in 2004, with thousands of eyewitnesses and survivors of the Holocaust, most of

whom had never been questioned before, Desbois and his team were able to locate some 700 mass graves. The results of the research by his organization Yahad in Unum, which is also active in other countries in Eastern Europe, have been compiled on a web site. In total, some 1,200 mass graves have now been identified in Ukraine.

The majority of Ukrainian as well as Belarusian and Lithuanian Jews were shot by the dreaded Nazi SS strike forces (Einsatzgruppen) in mass actions, with the Ukrainian police playing an important role.

The most powerful scenes in the documentary are the interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses of the mass murders. Desbois encounters many of the survivors in impoverished rural areas that are more evocative of the 19th than the 21st century. “The Holocaust in the East remains in the memory of the poor,” he comments.

Desbois conducts most of the interviews with villagers who were between 8 and 15 years old during the occupation. These survivors remain marked by the horrors they witnessed as children, when the German occupiers terrorized the entire population and murdered their Jewish neighbors.

Temofis Ryzvanuk, a poor farmer from the village of Bakhiv (in the Lutsk region), observed a mass execution at the age of 14. “Everyone was afraid here,” he tells the interviewer. “We were terribly fearful of the Germans.”

Ryzvanuk relates how Jewish men and women were forced by the lash to dig their own graves, only to be mown down by machine guns. “They were stripped naked. Men and women without distinction. After they killed them, they laid them head to head next to each other to save space...They were stacked like sardines.” German officers drove by during the executions and honked.

After questioning other villagers, Desbois was able to determine the location of the mass grave in which an estimated 9,000 people were buried. Grave robbers have searched there recently for jewelry and dental gold, leaving skulls and bone fragments strewn over the ground.

The mass executions were carefully planned. SS officers of the strike forces often drew up sketches of the executions in advance.

Desbois carried out particularly thorough research in northwest Ukraine, which is today one of the poorest regions of the country. Prior to the war, more than 150,000 Jews, almost half of the local population, inhabited the region. The area was also called “Jewish

land” and was a cradle of Jewish culture. During the Holocaust, all of the Jews there were liquidated.

Resistance against the German occupation was brutally put down in “revenge actions.” Thousands of Ukrainians—the populations of entire villages and rural communities—were burned alive. Nadia Stepanova, whose father was burned along with other villagers in a church, describes the attack on the area:

“The German soldiers came from Lutsk to occupy the whole region. There are almost no houses there anymore, if you noticed. There was resistance against the Germans. After the shooting, they came into the village. They stayed overnight and in the morning rounded up all the residents.

“They separated the Jews and drove them to a ghetto. Then they separated men on one side, women and children on the other side of a barn. We thought, now it’s over. We thought we would all die, burn, as was the case in other villages.”

Her husband, Misha Stepanov, leads the film team to two mass graves of murdered Jews. He relates that trucks full of Jews were brought to the spot. He estimates that around 1,000 victims are buried in the two nearby graves, with many children among the murdered.

Leonid Kvil, who was just seven at the time, watched the executions. “They killed them, collected their clothes and brought them to the ghetto in the city,” he says. “Then they threw more Jews on top of the dead. Some were still alive. And it began again. They killed them and then brought new victims. They all came from the ghetto. This went on for two days.

“They covered the grave. It was still moving after six months, with blood seeping out. The Germans took jewelry, earrings, they took everything. It...[the blood] flowed out three or four hundred yards. It flowed down to the river. It was awful.”

After their defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, the Nazis were in retreat, as the Red Army began to retake the occupied territories. SS chief Heinrich Himmler ordered that all traces of the war crimes of the SS and the Wehrmacht be systematically erased. In the course of so-called Operation 1005, hundreds of thousands of corpses of murdered Jews were disinterred from their graves and burned.

Often, Jewish survivors were forced to take part in these actions. Desbois spoke with Dr. Leon Wells (1925-2009), one of the few Ukrainian Jews to survive and a man who testified at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in the 1960s. He was forced by the SS to burn corpses and then examine the ashes for gold. (A detailed interview with Leon Wells can be found on YouTube.)

In the forest of Lysinitchy, where 90,000-100,000 Jews were murdered, the burning of corpses lasted up to six months.

The documentary indicates that the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union had partly encouraged anti-Semitic sentiments in the Ukrainian population, and that following the starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants resulting from Stalin’s forced collectivization (1929 to 1932), many, especially in rural areas, subsequently greeted the Nazis in 1941 as “liberators.”

At this point the documentary adopts a pronounced anti-communist stance. In fact, it was the October Revolution of 1917 and the victory of the Bolsheviks in the civil war in 1921 that brought an end to the anti-Semitism of the Czarist regime and the

mass murder of Jews. Tens of thousands of Jews had been killed during the civil war in Ukraine by both the White enemies of the Bolsheviks and the regime of Symon Petliura.

The Soviet government, led by Lenin and Trotsky, fiercely opposed anti-Semitism. The incitement of anti-Semitism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which began particularly during the Moscow trials in the 1930s and culminated in the anti-Semitic purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s, was one of the most egregious expressions of the counterrevolutionary nature of Stalinism.

The anti-Semitism of Stalin and significant sections of the bureaucracy was bound up with their nationalist politics and betrayal of the program of world socialist revolution. It was no coincidence that the incitement of anti-Semitism during the Great Terror of the 1930s was directed against Leon Trotsky and his followers, who defended the internationalist program of the October Revolution.

After the Second World War, the Holocaust was treated in the Soviet Union solely under the category of “crimes against the Soviet people.” A “Black Book” on the systematic murder of Jews, assembled by the Jewish intellectuals Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg from 1943 onwards, was published only in 1946. It was pulped in 1948.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Ukraine, a systematic rehabilitation of Ukrainian anti-Semites and Nazi collaborators has taken place. President Viktor Yushchenko, who came to power in 2004 in the Western-backed “Orange Revolution,” made the glorification of Symon Petliura and Stepan Bandera, head of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists during the Second World War, official government policy. He authorized public monuments for both men.

The Fatherland Party of the new Ukrainian prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and the far-right Svoboda party, which has several ministers in the coup government, both revere right-wing Ukrainian nationalists and fascists.

Berlin and Washington support this policy and are working directly with fascist forces to prepare for war against Russia and impose massive attacks on the Ukrainian working class. The documentary on the Holocaust in Ukraine is an important reminder of the monstrous deeds of German imperialism, which has now returned to the scene of its former crimes.

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