

# *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today*—the 1948 documentary restored

By Clara Weiss  
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In October, the Ninth Independent Russian Documentary Film Festival in New York City, an event organized by forces close to Russia's liberal, pro-imperialist opposition, screened the restored version of the 1948 documentary *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* (also simply known as *Nuremberg*). The film also had a one-week engagement at the Film Forum in New York in late September and early October.

The film was written and directed by Stuart Schulberg (brother of Budd Schulberg, screenwriter and future informer), who served with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Field Photographic Branch, headed by Hollywood director John Ford. It was intended to advertise the principles underlying the indictment of the Nazi criminals at the Nuremberg Trials. However, due to opposition from the American military and government, it was never shown in the US until 2010.

As the film's press kit indicates, "Over the years, the original picture negative and sound elements were lost or destroyed. Filmmakers Sandra Schulberg [daughter of Stuart Schulberg] and Josh Waletzky made a new 35mm negative, struck from the best quality extant print, borrowed from the German National Film Archive. Not one picture frame was removed or changed in this process."

Reflecting both the strengths and weaknesses of the main line of US Supreme Court Justice and Nuremberg lead prosecutor Robert H. Jackson's argumentation against the Nazi criminals, the film today still stands as an important historical document.

*Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* is structured around the four counts of the indictment against the two dozen Nazi defendants: the first was conspiracy; the second, crimes against peace; the third, war crimes; and the fourth, crimes against humanity. It thus closely follows, as noted, Jackson's arguments, placing a heavy emphasis on the Nazis preparation for the World War. Indeed, it was this count—crimes against peace or "aggressive war" as a crime—that constituted one of the most striking and ground-breaking features of the Nuremberg Trials.

The Nazi defendants in Nuremberg included Hermann Goering, the Reichsmarshal and head of the German Air Force; Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop; Wilhelm Frick, Minister of the Interior; Alfred Jodl, the chief of operations for the German High Command; Karl Doenitz, the commander-in-chief of the German navy; Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of Staff of the High Command of the Wehrmacht [German armed forces]; Hans Fritzsche, from Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda, responsible for radio

broadcasts in Nazi Germany; Walther Funk, Minister of Economics; Hans Frank, the Governor of the General Government in Poland; Julius Streicher, editor-in-chief of the notorious Nazi paper *Der Stürmer*; and Hjalmar Schacht, President of the Reichsbank. (All defendants of the trials are listed here)

*Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* opens with striking footage showing the ruins in which the Nazis left Europe. It raises the one question which, according to the narrator (Liev Schreiber has re-recorded the narration), haunted the people of Europe: how could this catastrophe have occurred?

For some 40 minutes, the film attempts to answer this question, by providing ample evidence—above all, through film footage and citations from Nazi sources—of the Hitler regime's careful preparations for war. It portrays these preparations as the result of a conspiracy by Germany's ruling elite and details the rapid effort at secret rearmament by the Nazi regime, along with its preparation for the annexation of Austria and a good part of what was then Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, Hitler assured the public in official proclamations that his government had no plans to go to war.

Thus, in early 1939, while preparations for the invasion of Poland later that year were well under way, Hitler hypocritically proclaimed that Polish-German friendship was one of the great achievements of recent European diplomacy. Moreover, the years preceding World War II—and, in some cases, even the first years of the war—witnessed the Nazis signing "non-aggression pacts" and neutrality agreements with almost all the countries they subsequently invaded, all without a declaration of war. This included not only Poland and the Soviet Union, but also Denmark, Belgium, France, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia.

To substantiate the charge of war crimes, the Schulberg film contains important footage of the Nazi terror in Poland and occupied USSR, but also France and the Netherlands. As examples, it shows footage of the sieges of Soviet cities and the murder of the entire population of the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane. However, the scale of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union, which cost 27 million Soviet lives and was the single most bloody conflict in human history, is somewhat downplayed.

In the concluding section, the documentary deals with the count of "crimes against humanity," which largely focuses on the murder of the Jews in the death camps in Poland, as well as the mass killing of the sick and mentally disabled.

Almost all of the footage contained in *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* was also used as evidence by the prosecution in Nuremberg. Nevertheless, much of it is relatively unknown and will be new to contemporary viewers, including rare footage of early gas vans used to murder Jews in the occupied territories of the USSR.

Particularly remarkable are the scenes in which various Nazi defendants try to defend themselves. The same men who had just invaded and destroyed an entire continent, and were responsible for countless wars of aggression and the murder of tens of millions of people, acted as if they had known and seen nothing. In an apt response, Jackson said in his closing argument:

“If we combine only the stories from the front bench, this is the ridiculous composite picture of Hitler’s government that emerges. It was composed of:

“A No. 2 man who knew nothing of the excesses of the Gestapo which he created, and never suspected the Jewish extermination program although he was the signer of over a score of decrees which instituted the persecutions of that race;

“A No. 3 man who was merely an innocent middleman transmitting Hitler’s orders without even reading them, like a postman or delivery boy;

“A Foreign Minister who knew little of foreign affairs and nothing of foreign policy;

“A Field Marshal who issued orders to the armed forces but had no idea of the results they would have in practice,” and so forth through the entire list of the defendant-criminals.

The film concludes with Jackson’s words: “Let Nuremberg stand as a warning to all who plan and wage aggressive war.”

The history of *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* is as instructive as its content. The commissioning of the documentary and its script were agreed upon at the highest levels of the American state. The script by the 24-year old Stuart Schulberg was endorsed by Justice Jackson and also backed by the then Secretary of War.

A significant factor motivating the condemnation of “aggressive war” in the trials was the broad anti-war and anti-capitalist sentiment in the population all over the world, where several generations had witnessed the horrifying descent into barbarism in two world wars.

Both the trial and the documentary remained silent not only about the root cause of the war, the historic crisis of capitalism, but also the many war crimes committed by US and British imperialism. In particular, the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was never condemned, nor was the issue even raised.

With the onset of the Cold War in 1948, even limited concessions made to anti-war sentiments had become unacceptable to the US military and political establishment. Jackson had already faced considerable opposition during the trials from the American military, which opposed on principle the persecution of any military officials for war crimes. Now, the Pentagon was vehemently opposed to the screening of Schulberg’s film.

The reasons were clear enough: the US military was not only guilty itself of war crimes during World War II, but was also in the midst of preparing new wars of aggression and crimes primarily

directed against the degenerated workers’ state in the USSR and the threat of international socialist revolution. In the years and decades to follow, the US would invade numerous countries, including Korea and Vietnam, and stage violent coups to establish anti-Communist dictatorships in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

Moreover, the American government had, almost immediately after Nuremberg, decided to halt the persecution of Nazi criminals in West Germany, Western Europe and America. The few post-Nuremberg trials in West Germany resulted in relatively mild sentences and most of the defendants being released by the late 1950s. At the same time, the newly founded CIA and the American military employed thousands of Nazi criminals and collaborators from Eastern Europe in its covert warfare against the Soviet Union.

In West Germany, *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* was shown with great success in 1948, breaking box office records and attracting hundreds of thousands of viewers. In the US, it fell victim to the strict censorship of the government and military. Not even Jackson was able to obtain a copy from the Pentagon—a planned screening of the film at the New York Bar Association had to be cancelled.

The hostility to Schulberg’s film was made plain enough in a note by Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall to Jackson from November 19, 1948: “In this country no general release is under consideration. It is my opinion that the theme is contrary to present policies and aims of the government; therefore, it is felt that the picture at this time can be of no significant value to the Army and the Nation as a whole.”

Stuart Schulberg’s children found material relating to the movie in the early 2000s and took it upon themselves to restore the original version of the documentary. It was eventually premiered in 2009 in The Hague—where the International War Crimes Tribunal is located—and subsequently shown in the US and other countries. A box set, including a DVD, a Blu-ray and a booklet, also came out.

There are serious limitations to explaining the war solely on the basis of the Nazis’ criminal preparations and conspiracies. Nonetheless, the extent of the planning and also the Hitler regime’s deception of the world’s population are important to grasp.

Indeed, when one watches the film today, one cannot help but think of the numerous statements made “off the record” by politicians and the various think tank studies which raise the possibility—and even inevitability—of a new world war today, once again behind the backs of the world’s working class. Whatever its limitations, *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today* is a significant anti-war movie and deserves a wide audience.

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