# *Night Will Fall*: A powerful depiction of Nazi atrocities

**Paul Mitchell**
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*A British Film Institute release, directed by André Singer, written by Lynette Singer and narrated by Helena Bonham Carter*

*Night Will Fall* is a timely film, given the climate of militarism and the deliberate encouragement of right-wing reaction in the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008. It details the Nazi atrocities that were the product of the crisis of German imperialism out of which Hitler's regime arose.

The work is a film about a lost film, "German Concentration Camps Factual Survey" (GCCFS), the official British record of the camps, which was shelved unfinished, for political reasons, at the end of the Second World War.

The survey has now been completed, 70 years later, by Imperial War Museum (IWM) experts sifting through some 100 reels of unedited footage shot by specially trained ex-combat soldiers to recreate the sixth and final reel following the instructions laid down by the original production team in 1945.

The GCCFS is a remarkable work that succeeds in depicting the terrible crimes of the Holocaust in a ground-breaking and accurate manner. It begins in April 1945 with British troops approaching Belsen-Bergen concentration camp. The first indications of the horrors that awaited them was the overwhelming smell, which they discovered emanated from heaps of emaciated corpses piled between groups of starving, expressionless survivors.

Cameraman Sgt. Mike Lewis describes how, "We were there for about two weeks filming all these sights. No film I've seen since really conveys the feeling of despair and horror that can be done to people who were Europeans of another faith … I thought as time passed by it might leave me, to forget, but it never does leave you".

Similar feelings were expressed by legendary film director Alfred Hitchcock, who provided advice on shooting the GCCFS, particularly ways to avoid accusations of fakery. In the 1970s, Hitchcock recounted, "At the end of the war, I made a film to show the reality of the concentration camps, you know. Horrible. It was more horrible than any fantasy horror. Then, nobody wanted to see it. It was too unbearable. But it has stayed in my mind all of these years".

The GCCFS includes footage from July 1944, when Soviet troops advancing from the East made the first contact with the system of camps at Majdanek, where warehouses were discovered littered with boxes of human hair, teeth, children's' toys, spectacles and other possessions.

Footage is shown of Auschwitz, which unlike Bergen-Belsen and Majdanek was a slave labour and extermination camp. More than a million people died in the gas chambers, their fates decided within minutes of arrival.

One of the few survivors, Eva Mozes, describes how, "The cattle car doors slid open. Thousands of people poured out of the cattle car. My father and two older sisters disappeared in the crowd. Never, ever did I see them again … A woman came up to my mother, took the little suitcase and asked, 'Are these two twins?' My mother said 'Yes', and the woman said, 'Why don't you say they are twins? It's a good thing to have twins here".

Eva and her sister Miriam were amongst the few sets of twins to survive from the 1,500 who underwent cruel medical experimentation at the hands of Dr Josef Mengele.

Amongst the unrelenting horror and despair, there are still signs of humanity. One sequence shows smiling children, glad at being rescued and another reveals how

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quickly the starving inmates could recover physically once they received food, medicines and attention.

The GCCFS was commissioned in April 1945 by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) under the command of US General Dwight D. Eisenhower for use as evidence in war crime trials and the "re-education" of the "vanquished Germans". It shows local inhabitants being marched into the camps to watch former SS officers burying the dead in mass graves . The smiles and good humour of the onlookers rapidly disappear.

Sidney Bernstein, who headed the film section at Britain's Ministry of Information was appointed as producer and assembled a small team including the "best known editor in London", Stewart McAllister. Richard Crossman, the Assistant Chief of SHAEF's Psychological Warfare Division, an offshoot of the intelligence organisation, the Special Operations Executive, was employed as scriptwriter. Crossman became a Labour Party MP in 1945, cabinet minister in the Harold Wilson government and editor of the *New Statesman* .

According to Dr Toby Haggith, Senior Curator at the IWM in charge of the restoration and completion of the GCCFS, the project confronted difficulties from the start. Some British officials wanted to censor the material, while others were opposed to showing it all—concerned about public reaction to the atrocities, especially the close-ups of dead women and children.

Haggith indicates there was "fierce rivalry" between Britain and the US over the direction the film should take. Bernstein wanted his meticulous "systematic record" to be educational and "to improve the world", but US officials wanted "a hard-hitting film—and they wanted it immediately".

The US withdrew its support from the GCCFS in July 1945, instead appointing filmmaker Billy Wilder to make a shorter film, *Death Mills*, from the same material, which was shown in the American sector.

*Night Will Fall* also discusses other pressures preventing the completion of the GCCFS. Bernstein later revealed, "The military command, our Foreign Office and the US State Department, decided that the Germans were in a state of apathy and had to be stimulated to get the machine of Germany working again. They didn't want to rub their noses in the atrocities".

The US and Britain were also embroiled in a controversy over what to do with Jewish refugees. Both governments wanted to prevent or limit the numbers travelling to their countries and Palestine and were concerned about the sympathy the documentary would arouse about their plight.

The development of the Cold War was a major factor. The uncompleted sixth reel intended to show the liberation of the camps in the East by the Soviet army, but their revelations about the atrocities were dismissed by the US and Britain as propaganda.

While *Night Will Fall* acknowledges that the beginning of the Cold War contributed to the demise of the GCCFS, it downplays the fact that thousands of Nazi war criminals became valuable assets for the US. They helped create the post-war German intelligence agency BND, or became spies, researchers and scientists for US military and intelligence agencies. At least five top associates of Holocaust organiser Adolf Eichmann were employed by the CIA after the war.

*Night Will Fall* ends with a plea that such terrible things not happen again. However, moral outrage cannot substitute for a historical and materialist understanding of the roots of such barbarity in the crisis of capitalism.

Historical developments meant that German imperialism had to turn to the Nazi movement in order to destroy the powerful German workers' movement and pursue its project, started in World War I, of an empire in the East (Lebensraum). The stability of the fascist regime required the removal and extermination of the "Jew-Bolsheviks", who were seen as a threat above all because of their profound connection with the workers ' movement and Marxism. Moreover, as imperialist rivalry increases, Germany is once again seeking to reassert its geostrategic interests and expand to the East--in Ukraine--through the coup assisted by the fascists in Svoboda and the Right Sector.

A trailer for *Night Will Fall* can be found here.

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