

The Unwanted: 80 years since the tragic odyssey of the MS St. Louis

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The documentary-drama *The Unwanted: The Odyssey of the St. Louis* (*Die Un gewollten: Die Irrfahrt der St. Louis*), which tells the story of the shipload of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis 80 years ago, is a gripping piece of television. The film was recently shown on one of Germany's leading television networks, ARD.

The MS *St. Louis*, a German ocean liner built by the Hamburg-American Line (and named after St. Louis, Missouri), with more than 900 men, women and children on board fleeing Nazi Germany, was prevented from landing by the Cuban, American and Canadian governments in 1939.

The title “The Unwanted” has been carefully chosen by director Ben von Grafenstein. Are not once again thousands of “unwanted” people fleeing wars, torture and severe poverty and seeking to cross the Mediterranean in a desperate attempt to land on European shores? Or risking their lives to cross militarised borders patrolled by armed guards and vigilantes, such as the one between the US and Mexico?

In May 1939, just six months after the murderous pogrom of November 1938 (*Kristallnacht*—the Night of Broken Glass) directed against Jews and Jewish homes, stores and synagogues, 937—almost exclusively Jewish passengers—boarded the MS *St. Louis* based in Hamburg. Confident of escaping the Nazi terror, they left everything behind and spent all their savings to buy passage and tourist visas to enter Cuba, from where most wanted to emigrate to the United States.

However, when the diesel-powered ship dropped anchor May 17 in Havana, the corrupt, US-backed Cuban dictatorship denied the refugees permission to land, despite previous promises. Supposedly, the entry requirements were changed while the ship was crossing the Atlantic.

In Havana harbour, relatives and friends gather. They wave and hail the ship's passengers, but they are not

allowed to board the *St. Louis*. The writer and director have created the fictional figure of Martha Stein (Britta Hammelstein), who is traveling on the ship along with her young son. Her husband (Golo Euler) has escaped from a concentration camp and made his way to Havana a few months previously. He is among those in the crowd in Havana. Dressed as a sailor, he attempts to embrace his wife and child, but he is prevented by a Nazi crew member, the same man who abused Martha at the beginning of the voyage.

After negotiations with Captain Gustav Schröder (Ulrich Noethen), Cuban authorities agree to accept only 29 passengers: two families and some travellers with Spanish and Cuban passports, plus one passenger who has attempted suicide and been transferred to the hospital in Havana. After five days, the *St. Louis* has to leave the port under the threat of violence by the Cuban authorities.

Captain Schröder then sets course for the US, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt also denies the *St. Louis* landing at a US port, followed in turn by the refusal of the Canadian government of Liberal Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.

The passengers react with desperation when the shipping line orders the vessel to return to Germany and they are confronted with the likelihood of being sent to concentration camps. There is talk of a mass suicide and one passenger does attempt such a desperate action. Plans are also discussed to hijack the ship and force it to change course.

Captain Gustav Schröder has been a staunch member of the Nazi Party since 1933, but he remains loyal to his principles as a naval officer, according to which all passengers in international waters must be treated equally.

“Don't you want to protect your son in Hamburg,” asks First Officer Klaus Ostermeyer (Johannes Kienast), alluding to Schröder's disabled child who is threatened with euthanasia by the Nazis. “That's another matter,”

replies Schröder, whose conscience will not allow him to collaborate in the probable death of 900 people.

Despite Gestapo surveillance on board, Schröder, with the help of Jewish aid organisations, repeatedly strives to find safe harbour at other ports. He negotiates with duplicitous officials and ambassadors, and even attempts to stage an accident off the English coast. It is Martha Stern who becomes his alter ego, the voice of his conscience. She makes clear what sort of cruel persecution the Jewish passengers faced in Germany.

Just under a month after leaving the port of Hamburg, the *St. Louis* landed in Antwerp, Belgium. Belgium, the Netherlands, France and England agree to divide up the refugees between them. There is jubilation on board, but one year later the Nazis occupied Belgium, the Netherlands and France. According to recent research, 254 of the passengers lost their lives, victims of the Nazi Holocaust.

Gustav Schröder returned to Hamburg and was not prosecuted by the Nazis. Before his death in 1959, he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit by the West German government “for services to the people and the country in rescuing emigrants.” He was also posthumously inducted by Israel into the circle of the “Righteous among nations.”

During the same period of the *St. Louis* odyssey on the Atlantic Ocean, two more refugee ships were on their way to Cuba, including the *Orinoco* from Bremer Vulkan with 200 Jewish refugees on board. They were also denied permission to land in Cuba and the United States. Unlike Schröder, their captains followed orders from the Nazis and delivered the emigrants to their persecutors in Germany. Their fates remain unknown.

Ben von Grafenstein (*Blindflug, Kasimir and Karoline*) has made a deeply moving film that brings the fate of Jewish refugees to the notice of a new generation. The film is based on the diary and records of the captain, other documents, and interviews with eyewitnesses, combined with compelling feature film scenes. It contains at the same time a clear warning: in the struggle against right-wing extremist parties such as Germany’s racist Alternative for Germany (AfD), in the struggle against anti-Semitic acts of violence such as the recent deadly assault in Halle, so-called democratic governments and parties cannot be regarded as allies.

This warning is undermined somewhat when the film ends with an apology by the current Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, in parliament in Ottawa on November 7, 2018. Trudeau apologised for the

“heartlessness” of the Canadian government at that time led by the Liberal Party he heads today. With its refusal to allow entry in 1939, Canada had contributed to the “cruel fate” of many people, Trudeau declared.

In fact, capitalist governments all over the world are pursuing similar “heartless” methods today against refugees seeking to flee the endless wars unleashed by the US and other major powers. Trudeau himself, who has boasted that his country had accepted more Syrian refugees than the US, has since tightened up Canada’s immigration policy, dramatically reducing the number of asylum seekers.

It is the crisis of world capitalism and looming social revolution that once again induces the ruling elites worldwide to resort to war and fascism, along with their accompaniments—chauvinism, racism and anti-Semitism. No one made this point more powerfully than Leon Trotsky, Lenin’s collaborator in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and organiser of the Left Opposition against Stalin. One year after the *St. Louis* odyssey, he wrote:

“The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States. In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, travel from country to country is paralysed by passports and visas. The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism. ... Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”—Leon Trotsky: *Imperialist War and the World Proletarian Revolution* (1940)



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