70th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

Speer Goes to Hollywood: A wake-up call about the danger of trivialising Nazi crimes

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This is the second in a series of articles on the Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, which recently took place February 20–March 1. Part 1 was posted on February 28.

The title of Vanessa Lapa's documentary, *Speer Goes to Hollywood*, and its tagline, "The Unbelievable Second Career of the Good Nazi," are enough to stop one in one's tracks.

Albert Speer (1905-1981), Hitler's leading architect and the Nazi minister of armaments and war production, a Hollywood star? How is this possible? Or is Lapa's film merely a scathing satire at a time when neo-fascists are raising their heads and committing brutal murders, such as recently took place in Hanau?

Audiences came face to face with a bitter reality at the world premiere of the documentary at the 70th Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale).

Belgian-born, Israel-based director Lapa is herself a child of Holocaust survivors. Her film probes an open wound: in spite of historical research to the contrary, Speer is still treated by some as a harmless figure, a "good Nazi"—a mere technocrat in Hitler's government, just one more opportunist bureaucrat in the Nazi machinery and not the vicious organiser of the mass exterminations in the concentration camps.

Lapa's documentary comprehensively does away with this myth.

Speer, the highest-ranking Nazi to escape the death penalty in the Nuremberg war crimes trials (1945-1946), fashioned this myth himself and received support from well-known historians, academics and journalists. In particular, Hitler biographer Joachim Fest and publisher-writer Wolf Jobst Siedler assisted Speer with his books *Inside the Third Reich* and *Spandau: The Secret Diaries*, which he had already drafted during his 20-year prison sentence in Berlin's Spandau Prison. In those books, Speer self-servingly portrayed himself as an opponent of Hitler, as someone who even planned an attack on the fascist dictator.

After Speer's release, those two books, published by Ullstein Press, together with countless interviews (above all, in West Germany's two leading magazines *Spiegel* and *Stern*) and the secret sales of paintings looted by the Nazis, brought in millions, enabling Speer to live in comfort in his family's villa in Heidelberg.

Speer died in 1981, but the myth of the "noble Nazi" lived on and found expression in a number of films, including Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Downfall* (2004), which incorrectly depicts Speer as someone who criticised his superiors and refused to accept orders.

Speer Goes to Hollywood helps to demolish all of this. Lapa documents Paramount Pictures' plan in 1971 to film Speer's *Inside the Third Reich*, with Speer himself involved in the screenplay. Lapa came across the story at the premiere of her previous film, *The Decent One*, about SS chief Heinrich Himmler, which was shown at the 2014 Berlinale. A producer drew her attention to the correspondence between Himmler and Speer, and also to English screenwriter Andrew Birkin (brother of actress-singer Jane Birkin), who in 1971—as a 26-year-old—held months of discussions with Speer.

After Birkin, now in his 70s, met with Lapa, he made the 40 hours of taped conversations with Speer available to her. This forms the basis of *Speer Goes to Hollywood*, supplemented by rare archival footage of Speer before and during World War II, and later, as a retiree living quietly in the countryside.

The interviews reveal the thoroughly unscrupulous manner in which Speer sought to whitewash his past. He openly presents himself as someone who, in a calculated manner, manipulates and even distorts his biography to cover up his criminal activities. When Birkin, who is overly impressed by his interviewee's sophisticated and eloquent manner, speaks to veteran British director Carol Reed (*The Third Man*, 1949) about individual chapters of the planned film, the latter becomes increasingly critical and considers the film to be irresponsible. Paramount Pictures finally dropped the project.

Lapa contrasts the 1971 conversations with historical recordings, including long sequences from the Nuremberg trials shown in unprecedented quality. Lapa's Realworks production company in Tel Aviv "digitised almost all of the sound recordings of the trial in around six to seven months of work," she told the WSWS. The images and film recordings also had to be meticulously edited.

The images of the brutal treatment of labourers forced to work for the Krupp steel and armaments firm are particularly shocking. When Speer was interrogated in Nuremberg, photographs of a long row of iron cupboards on the Krupp site were shown. They served as punishment chambers for forced labourers who were accused of working too slowly or being late for the start of the shift. These "strollers," as Speer called them, had to spend 48 hours standing up in these very narrow, windowless cupboards, women and men,

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several crammed together. They were also obliged to go to the toilet in the cupboards.

In his own self-promoting postwar statements, Speer always claimed he was not responsible for the forced labourers. This sounds very different in Birkin's recordings: "Shall I tell you how many workers I had?" Speer can be heard saying with pride. "In 1942 there were 2.6 million workers. In the spring of '43 there were 3.2 million. In September '43 I had 12 million people working for me." About a third of all these workers died.

Speer goes on to state that he repeatedly requested new contingents of workers for armaments production from Fritz Sauckel, who organised the work camps. The slave labourers were to consist of all physically able Soviet, Polish and French concentration camp prisoners and prisoners of war. At the behest of Speer, Sauckel had these people deported to Germany in cattle cars.

Speer adds, in amused fashion, that when the verdicts were pronounced in Nuremberg, "his opponents among the accused" protested, and that Hermann Göring muttered that it was Speer who should have been given the death penalty, not Sauckel.

In response to Speer's claim that he had not seen a concentration camp from the inside, Lapa's film includes testimony during the Nuremberg trials of a young slave labourer from the Mauthausen concentration camp. When asked whether he had seen any of the accused in the dock at Mauthausen, the witness pointed to Speer: "Yes, he was there." The witness continued by saying that Speer had visited the camp several times and had always been greeted warmly by the camp management.

Lapa's film features historical footage revealing how Speer agreed to the use of concentration camp prisoners for his construction projects with Himmler, whom he liked to refer to as a "monster" after 1945. Funding for the company "Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (DEST)," which was founded by the Nazi SS, came from Speer's budget and went directly to pay for the construction of concentration camps near quarries and clay pits.

Speer was not only responsible for approximately 1,000 forced labour camps around Berlin, some of which he controlled directly under his own construction agency, he also organised the "eviction" of Jews in Berlin from 1939 and the creation of "Jew-free" neighbourhoods he planned to use for his construction projects. The lists of Jews expelled from their homes formed the basis for their subsequent deportation to Riga.

And, contrary to his later claims, Speer was an anti-Semite himself. He makes this absolutely clear in his response to one of Birkin's questions: he did not like Jews. According to Speer, eastern Jews in particular were *nouveau riche* money-grubbers who wanted to take advantage of Germans—a standard argument of every anti-Semite.

The film's concluding section shows footage of Speer's release from Spandau in 1966. He is surrounded by press and evidently enjoying his notoriety, making a point of politely praising the treatment he had received in prison. His popularity cut across the entire media and all the political parties. The chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Willy Brandt, even sent him flowers upon his release.

The fact that Albert Speer was courted in this way in the postwar period demonstrates the historical continuity of Nazism after the so-called "year zero." New facts are constantly being uncovered revealing the way in which former Nazi personnel were integrated into the postwar West German state, be it in the judiciary, police, army, universities, ministries or, as was revealed at the start of this year's Berlinale, cultural institutions. The first director of the Berlinale, Alfred Bauer, was a leading Nazi film industry official and member of the SA.

A September 26, 1966, *Der Spiegel* article, published shortly before Speer's release from prison, headlined "Hitler's Friend and Opponent Albert Speer," made clear why Speer was such a source of fascination for the new ruling elite in West Germany. According to the article, Speer was an apolitical architect who "terrorised no one" and had accomplished "an unimaginable German armaments miracle," who "saved German industry from Hitler's self-destructive involvement" and thus "even contributed to [postwar German Chancellor] Ludwig Erhard's economic miracle" (Magnus Brechtken, *Albert Speer: A German Career*, 2017).

In other words, Speer's brutal exploitation of millions of forced labourers, with which he boosted armaments production in the last years of World War II, also enabled German imperialism to renew its economy after its defeat in the war. The portrayal of Speer as an opponent of Hitler also implied that from now on the German bourgeoisie would be "democratic" and "anti-fascist."

Speer was tailor-made for this role. He was a "prototype of the social group of managerial elites who consciously opted for Hitler and provided Nazism its dynamic with their specialist knowledge. The rulers could not have functioned so effectively without all the doctors, lawyers and administrative experts who provided their services," author Magnus Brechtken remarked at the time of the publication of his book. Speer was only one of the "most committed, most ambitious," and, therefore, after 1945, "also the ideal figure for anyone who wanted to claim: 'I did participate but I wasn't aware of any crimes.'"

It is not yet known whether or when *Speer Goes to Hollywood* will make its way into cinemas. Financial support for the film's production was not forthcoming in Germany. As soon as a cinema release has been organised, the film is a must for everyone who wants to fight against the trivialisation of the Nazis and the return of fascism.

To be continued

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