

The US and the Holocaust: Documentarian Ken Burns examines the failure of Roosevelt to rescue the victims of the Nazis' Final Solution

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7 December 2022

The US and the Holocaust is the latest of more than 15 films made by Ken Burns, with Lynn Novick having joined him over the past 20 years. The documentary was broadcast in October on US public television and is still available for streaming online. It generally follows the themes of the exhibition on "Americans and the Holocaust" initially mounted some years ago by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.

The title of the documentary, directed by Burns, Novick and Sarah Botstein, suggests that a critical and serious examination of the US role in the Holocaust might be forthcoming. That, however, is not the case.

The three-part, six-hour film, written by Burns' longtime collaborator Geoffrey Ward and narrated by actor Peter Coyote, contains much that is valuable, including interviews with Holocaust survivors and stills and video footage of the period leading up to the Second World War and beyond. But it is fatally flawed by its failure to explain either the reasons for the Holocaust itself or the responsibility of American capitalism and the government of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Nazis' Final Solution would finally claim the lives of six million Jews, and the US government barely lifted a finger to rescue the victims. Instead of an explanation of the US role, however, the series offers an apology, shifting the blame for official inaction from the ruling class to the American population as a whole, just as the Germans, including the working class, are held collectively responsible for Hitler.

This theme is repeated again and again in the course of the film's three episodes. The introduction to the first episode concludes with a reference to the family of Otto Frank, the father of Anne Frank, whose war-time diary became an international testimonial to the tragedies and crimes of the Third Reich. Speaking of the Frank family, the narrator states:

They would eventually try to seek a safe haven in the United States, only to find, like countless others fleeing Nazism, that most Americans did not want to let them in.

Toward the conclusion of the final episode, "The Homeless, Tempest-Tossed (1942-)," the narrator quotes the famous lines from Anne Frank's diary: "I still believe in spite of everything that people are really good at heart." The film switches to Eva Schloss, a survivor of Auschwitz, whose mother married Otto Frank after the war. Schloss says of Anne Frank's fundamental optimism: "If she would have survived, she wouldn't have said that."

These examples give a sense of the documentary's pessimistic, essentially misanthropic interpretation, which attributes the Holocaust and

the failure of the American government to seriously oppose it to a disembodied anti-Semitism, presented as timeless, innate in the human race and entirely divorced from the economic and class foundations of capitalist society.

Above all, the film makes no reference to the mass struggles of the working class for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of socialism, and the impact on the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s of the defeat of these struggles in the aftermath of the 1917 socialist revolution in Russia.

No one would expect Burns, a pro-Democratic Party liberal, to present a Marxist explanation of the Holocaust and its roots in the decay of capitalism. But to omit entirely the revolutionary upheavals triggered by World War I, including the October Revolution, and the response of international capitalism to the threat of socialist revolution can only result in a highly distorted examination of historical events that shaped the 20th century.

This history is all the more significant because the lessons of the Holocaust are more urgent than ever. As the documentary itself indicates at its conclusion, the events of 80 or 100 years ago (Mussolini staged his March on Rome in October 1922) are anything but ancient history.

Giorgia Meloni has just led her "post-Fascist" Brothers of Italy to power. Jair Bolsonaro, the fascist president of Brazil, threatened to reject his defeat in the runoff election held on October 31.

And in the US, the transformation of the Republicans into an outright fascist party is far advanced, with Donald Trump running for president again in 2024 despite the defeat in the midterm elections of his hand-picked election deniers, while the party establishment shifts toward rivals who are no less fascistic, such as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

The refusal of the Democrats to hold any of the top coup conspirators accountable and their own policies of war, social inequality and attacks on the democratic rights of the working class have enabled the Republicans to regain control of the House less than two years after the GOP overwhelmingly supported the fascist assault on the US Capitol. Meanwhile, the multi-millionaire rapper Kanye West declares his admiration for Hitler and spouts anti-Semitic filth after meeting with Trump in Mar-a-Lago, while the latter declares his support for terminating the US Constitution in order to overturn the 2020 election and seize power.

Given the immense historical and contemporary political significance of the Holocaust, and the complexity of the issues involved, a serious review of the Burns documentary requires a review of the main features of the historical context within which it unfolded.

The end of the “Golden Door”

Although the focus is understandably on the 1933-45 history of the Third Reich, a film concerning immigration and refugee policies in the US must deal with these issues as they arose in the 19th century. The first episode, “The Golden Door,” discusses the period of mass European immigration to the US, roughly spanning the years 1870 to 1914. This was interrupted by the first imperialist world war, briefly growing again in the early 1920s before the anti-immigration campaign that culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. That reactionary measure established stringent quotas, especially directed against Jews and immigrants from Southern Europe and Eastern Europe. The Johnson-Reed Act was explicitly praised by Hitler, along with the Jim Crow system in the South and the continuing ban on immigration from East Asia.

What is missing from the documentary, however, is any explanation for the shift from a policy of encouraging immigration to one based on extreme nationalism and xenophobia, with more than a mere undercurrent of anti-Semitism.

The post-Civil War period was a period of rapid expansion of American industry and finance, increasingly dominated by great monopolies. The industrial barons needed a large supply of low-wage, super-exploited labor and turned to economically impoverished social layers in Southern and Eastern Europe to fill their factories, mines and work places.

A rising American capitalism announced its emergence as an imperialist competitor for world domination in 1898 with its brutal conquest and colonization of Cuba and the Philippines, in the name of liberating their populations, in the Spanish-American War.

But the mounting global contradictions of capitalism produced the Great War of 1914-1918, of which Leon Trotsky wrote in 1915: “The present war is at bottom a revolt of the forces of production against the political form of nation and state.” The war announced the imperialist epoch of wars and revolutions.

It gave rise in 1917 to the Russian Revolution, led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky, which established the first workers’ state in history and announced the onset of world socialist revolution.

The Bolsheviks, it should be noted, continued the tradition of the socialist workers’ movement of steadfastly opposing anti-Semitism, which was a standby of the Tsarist regime and its Black Hundreds forces, who led repeated bloody pogroms against the Jews. The workers’ state established by the October 1917 uprising of the workers’ councils (“soviets” in Russian) outlawed anti-Semitism and all other forms of racial discrimination.

To understand what gave rise to the reactionary Johnson-Reed anti-immigrant policy, and the general political reaction of which it was a part, one must have knowledge of the explosive impetus to the class struggle and socialist revolution internationally given by the Russian Revolution, and the savage repression employed by the capitalist class, including in the US, to crush the movement of the working class.

Over four million workers—one fifth of the US workforce—participated in strikes in 1919, fueled by rampant inflation during and after the war. The strikes—3,600 in all—included a national steel strike involving 365,000 steelworkers and a miners’ strike joined by 400,000 coal miners. The number of striking workers would not be matched until 1937—the high point of the Depression-fueled wave of sit-down strikes that established industrial unions in the US (also unmentioned in the Burns documentary).

The year began with a general strike in Seattle. In April 1919, Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs was imprisoned for having made a public speech in opposition to the war the previous year. Debs, who had led the 1894 Pullman strike, helped found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and won six percent of the vote in the presidential election of 1912 as the Socialist Party candidate, ran again for president from his jail

cell in 1920 and received well over 900,000 votes.

The response of the ruling class and the entire political system and state apparatus was one of frightened but savage repression. The steel strike was defeated, ultra-right militias were mobilized to attack and, in some cases, torture and murder militant workers (such as Frank Little of the IWW), labor frame-ups abounded—Tom Mooney, Sacco and Vanzetti, Big Bill Haywood—and thousands of workers were blacklisted.

The ruling class deliberately stoked up racism in an attempt to pit white workers against black workers as the Great Migration began to send African-American workers from the South to the North. The year 1919 saw the eruption of what became known as Red Summer, when white supremacist terror and race riots occurred in more than three dozen cities across the US.

In the ensuing decade—dominated by political reaction, including the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan as a major force in the Democratic Party—the US Supreme Court outlawed picketing, overturned national child labor laws and abolished minimum wage laws for women. Union membership in the 1920s fell from 5 million to 3 million.

The Democratic administration of Woodrow Wilson launched a series of Red Scares following the October revolution in Russia. Left-wing publications were suppressed. Between 1919 and 1921, Wilson’s attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, launched a series of raids, which became known as the “Palmer Raids,” in which thousands of left-wing immigrants, particularly Russians, were rounded up, jailed and deported without even token deference to due process rights or the rights to free speech and association.

This was part of an international process. In Germany, the working class rose up in 1918 and 1919, formed workers’ councils and fought to establish a socialist workers’ state. The workers were brutally suppressed by a government headed by the Social Democratic Party, which had gone over to the side of German imperialism by voting for war credits at the outset of World War I in August 1914.

In Italy, a general strike movement was ultimately crushed due to the refusal of the Socialist Party leadership to organize a revolutionary struggle for political power. In Hungary, a Soviet Republic headed by Bela Kun was overthrown after just four months.

These and other defeats of the initial wave of workers’ struggles inspired by the Russian Revolution resulted from the lack of a mature, politically clarified and resolute Marxist revolutionary party of the Bolshevik type. They were followed by subsequent defeats—in particular, the missed revolutionary opportunity in Germany in 1923—leaving the Soviet Union isolated and ringed by hostile powers. This, in turn, facilitated the rise and consolidation of a nationalist and opportunist bureaucracy under Joseph Stalin, and its defeat of the internationalist Left Opposition headed by Trotsky.

The global Depression that erupted in 1929 brought class tensions and the crisis of capitalist democracy to new heights. But while Burns’ documentary presents Hitler’s rise as paralleling the Depression years in Germany and internationally, there is only passing mention of the mass parties of the working class, which commanded greater support than the Nazis in the final election before Hitler became chancellor in January 1933. Hitler’s triumph is depicted as all but preordained. In fact, it took place only because the working class was paralyzed by the pro-capitalist Social Democracy and the suicidal ultra-leftism of the Stalinist Communist Party, which was dictated by the Comintern in Moscow.

Working class opposition to Nazi crimes against the Jews

The documentary’s second episode, “Yearning to Breathe Free,”

highlights the role of such figures as automaker and virulent anti-Semite Henry Ford; Father Coughlin, the fascist radio priest; and Charles Lindbergh, the world-famous aviator and sympathizer of the Nazi regime.

There is much footage on the period of the rise of Hitler and the consolidation of the Nazi dictatorship in the 1930s, including the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws and other measures taken against the Jewish population. The role of the nationwide Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9, 1938 is emphasized, convincing those several hundred thousand Jews who remained in Germany to leave.

Among the program's significant elements are interviews with Holocaust survivors. Their eyewitness testimony will certainly be beneficial, especially to younger generations, for whom the events of the Second World War period are far beyond living memory, and whose education on this vital history is sparse or nonexistent.

Guy Stern, still alive at the age of 100, explains that his parents were able to send him to the US to live with his aunt and uncle, who were US citizens. Entranced though he was by jazz music and his new American girlfriend, the need to rescue the rest of his family never left his mind. As hard as he tried, however, he came up against the brutal reality of the same restrictive immigration quotas, and his parents perished, like so many others. Stern was drafted in 1943 and later became part of a team that interrogated prisoners of war.

There is no question that anti-Semitism was on the rise in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, but why that was so and what countervailing tendencies existed remain a closed book to the creators of *The US and the Holocaust*. The absence of a class analysis and consideration of the mass struggles of the working class leads to glaring contradictions in the documentary's own presentation.

For example, the film documents the huge popular protests that took place across the US on March 27, 1933 in opposition to Hitler's savage attacks on Jews, socialists and communists following the Reichstag fire at the end of February of that year.

It shows film clips and still photos of the rally at Madison Square Garden that was attended by 22,000 people, with 35,000 more demonstrating outside the hall in defense of the Jews. It notes that similar rallies were held in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and 70 other cities and towns across the country, in which more than one million Americans took part (at a time when the US population, at 126 million, was far less than half of what it is today).

But no attempt is made to square this event with the claim that Roosevelt's hands-off policy in regard to Jewish refugees was a response to public opinion.

Entirely omitted is the highly significant mass rally that was called and led by the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in the United States, which brought out 50,000 workers to oppose a fascist rally held by the German-American Bund in Madison Square Garden on February 20, 1939. The workers ringed the Garden and fought off repeated attacks by thousands of New York City police—including 1,780 on horseback—mobilized by the liberal LaGuardia city administration to protect the Nazis inside.

The Stalinist Communist Party USA opposed the Trotskyist-led mass anti-Nazi rally and simply refused to report it, including the brutal police attack on the anti-fascists, in the *Daily Worker*. At that time the CP was supporting Roosevelt as part of the Stalinist Communist International's counterrevolutionary policy of the "popular front." This policy systematically subordinated the working class to "democratic" capitalist politicians and governments around the world, presenting them as bulwarks against fascism, while Stalin's GPU secret police murdered Trotskyists and other revolutionary socialists in the Soviet Union, Spain, France and many other countries.

US imperialism and Roosevelt's war aims

Throughout the documentary, the imperialist nature of the war, including the role of the United States and its democratic capitalist allies, is concealed. Rather, the conflict is presented as a moral struggle between democracy and fascism. There is no suggestion that the strategic and tactical decisions taken by the Roosevelt administration, including its response to the mass murder of European Jews, were in any way anchored in material, economic and geo-political interests of the US capitalist class.

On this basis, it is impossible to explain Roosevelt's failure to take any serious measures to rescue the Jews trying to flee the genocide being carried out by the Nazis and forces allied with the German occupiers in Europe. The flimsiness of the explanations provided by Burns emerges most clearly in the third and final episode of his documentary.

The episode begins by noting that by early 1942, press reports in the US were making it clear that Germany was working systematically to murder every Jewish man, woman and child on the European continent.

The narrator explains: "Jewish Americans and their supporters pleaded that somehow, something be done to stop the killing. But President Roosevelt and his commanders were convinced that only by crushing the Nazis and winning the war as soon as possible could the allies put an end to it." This claim is made repeatedly: Roosevelt was motivated by the need to win the war as quickly as possible.

What is largely ignored is the fact that a substantial section of the American ruling class—as, indeed, the ruling classes of all the Allied countries—sympathized with the Nazis and supported Hitler's declared agenda of eradicating Bolshevism and smashing the Soviet Union. Particularly after Hitler launched his "war of annihilation" against the Soviet Union in June of 1941, a faction of the ruling elite, including within the Roosevelt administration, saw the bloody fighting on the eastern front as a means of destroying the USSR and at the same time weakening Washington's chief rival for control of Europe, Germany.

The claim that Roosevelt's refusal to take measures to save the Jews was motivated by a desire to win the war against Germany as rapidly as possible is belied by the refusal of Washington and London to heed Stalin's pleas, beginning in 1942, to open up a second front in northwest Europe. The US and Britain delayed launching what became the Normandy invasion for two-and-a-half years after the US entered the war in December of 1941. This left the Soviet people and the Red Army, whose founder and first commander, Leon Trotsky, had long been banished, to shoulder virtually the entire burden, at a horrific cost in human lives and suffering, of militarily defeating the German Wehrmacht. It also allowed Hitler to concentrate the vast bulk of his military forces on the eastern front, extending the duration of the conflict.

Roosevelt was not an anti-Semite and was not in the pro-Nazi camp. Nevertheless, he supported the delay in opening up a second front in Western Europe. Alerting the American people and world opinion to the unfolding genocide against the Jews in Europe would have increased popular pressure for the immediate launching of an Allied offensive in Western Europe.

Whatever moral qualms Roosevelt had, his priorities were determined not by morality but by the strategic interests of US imperialism, whose chief executive he was. In a word, the American ruling class was determined to emerge from the war as the global hegemonic power, defeating Germany and supplanting Great Britain, and asserting dominance in the Pacific at the expense of Japan. Specific questions, including the plight of the Jews, were subordinated to these aims.

As the documentary shows, Roosevelt's State Department remained throughout staunchly opposed to any loosening of the Johnson-Reed immigration quotas for the purpose of providing refuge for Jews and other victims of Nazi mass murder. This reached truly criminal proportions.

In January of 1944, an assistant to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., a Jew, issued a report to Morgenthau titled “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews.” The report, which has never been released to the public, singled out Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, who was in charge of admitting refugees, and argued (according to Wikipedia):

... certain officials within the State Department not only had failed to use US government tools to rescue the Jews, but had used them instead to prevent or obstruct rescue attempts, as well as preventing relevant information from being available to the American public, and made further attempts to cover up such obstructionist activities.

Barely mentioned in the course of the six-hour film is perhaps the most notorious anti-Semite and pro-Nazi in the State Department at the time, Roosevelt’s ambassador to Britain from March 1938 to late October 1940, Joseph Kennedy, Sr. He is cited only as predicting after the outbreak of the war that Britain would lose. In fact, he lobbied furiously against any US intervention against Nazi Germany and hobnobbed with open Hitler backers in the UK who believed that fascism was the cure for communism, such as Viscountess Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor, another transplanted American.

Particularly egregious is the prominence in the Burns-Novick documentary of Yale University historian and leading academic propagandist for the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, Timothy Snyder. Snyder’s 2010 book *Bloodlands* advances the far-right revisionist historical falsification according to which Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union was essentially a defensive response to crimes and aggression by Stalin and the USSR.

In the course of the documentary, in which Snyder appears a number of times to offer “expert” analysis, he does not advance his revisionist apologia for Hitler. That would be difficult, given that the footage in the film itself makes perfectly clear that Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union was a premeditated war of extermination, carried out with the most horrific and intentional cruelty, and inextricably linked to his drive to eliminate all Jews and socialists.

Instead, dishonestly concealing his own historical positions, he says: “Once Germany invades the Soviet Union with the idea of destroying the Soviet Union, mass murder can take place.” He adds, “Specialists were enlisted to follow the advancing army and hunt down and kill Jewish men and partisans who dared wage guerrilla war against the invaders.”

He makes no mention, however, of the right-wing Ukrainian nationalists’ collaboration with the Nazis, under such figures as the Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera, who is honored today by the Zelensky regime in Kiev.

The fatalistic and even demoralized outlook advanced in Burns’ documentary shares much in common, although less crudely presented, with the 1996 book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, by Daniel Goldhagen.

In an extremely valuable review of that much-touted book, David North made the incisive observation that for those who reject “a study of the economic foundations, class structure and political struggles of European and German society prior to the advent of the Third Reich,” the Holocaust is an example of how “the forces of human evil, lodged deep in man’s soul or psyche, gained ascendancy, as they inevitably must, over the restraining moral influences of civilization.”

Indeed, toward the end of *The US and the Holocaust*, it is left to writer Daniel Mendelsohn, the grandson of Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide, to articulate precisely this point of view. “There’s no bottom to the things

that people will do to one another,” he says. “The structures of what we think of as our civilized lives fall apart very easily, surprisingly easily.”

History, socialism and the fate of the Jews

The answer to this outlook of despair in the face of the barbarism of capitalism in mortal crisis lies precisely in a study of history, on the basis of the scientific method of historical materialism, and, above all, an assimilation of the strategic experiences of the international working class and the revolutionary socialist movement. This must be done, however, from the standpoint not of passive contemplation, but rather as a guide to revolutionary practice.

Once again quoting from David North’s review of the Goldhagen book:

The victory of fascism was not the direct and inevitable product of anti-Semitism, but the outcome of a political process shaped by the class struggle. In that process, the critical factor was the crisis of the German socialist movement, which was, it must be pointed out, part of a broader political crisis of international socialism.

Hitler’s rise was not irresistible and his victory was not inevitable. The Nazis were able to come to power only after the mass socialist and communist parties had shown themselves, in the course of the entire postwar period, to be politically bankrupt and utterly incapable of providing the distraught masses with a way out of the disaster created by capitalism.

As Trotsky put it in 1938 in the founding program of the Fourth International: “The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”

The Fourth International was founded in implacable struggle against Stalinism, the chief counterrevolutionary agency of world imperialism, and its social democratic, centrist and revisionist accomplices, to resolve the crisis of leadership of the working class. Under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International, it is doing precisely that today, under conditions of an unprecedented breakdown of world capitalism and a resurgence of the international working class.

With his typical prescience, Trotsky wrote in 1938:

It is possible to imagine without difficulty what awaits the Jews at the mere outbreak of the future world war. But even without war the next development of world reaction signifies with certainty the *physical extermination* of the Jews...

Now more than ever, the fate of the Jewish people—not only their political but also their physical fate—is indissolubly linked with the emancipating struggle of the international proletariat. [Emphasis in the original].

The Holocaust was, in the final analysis, the price which the Jewish people and all humanity paid for the failure of the working class to overthrow capitalism. The building of the world Trotskyist movement today, based on the lessons of history, will ensure that this time the forces of reaction will be defeated by a working class strengthened and clarified by its revolutionary leadership, and a new page in history—world socialism—will open up.



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