Nuremberg: Where does fascist barbarism come from?

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James Vanderbilt's new film *Nuremberg* centers on the International Military Tribunal of 22 Nazi leaders, the most famous of a series of trials of high-level Nazi officials after the Second World War.

The Nazi officials were tried for their responsibility for aggressive war and crimes against humanity, most notoriously the genocide of six million European Jews. The Nuremberg proceedings began almost exactly 80 years ago, on November 20, 1945, and lasted until October 1, 1946. Nineteen of the defendants were found guilty, of whom 12 were sentenced to death, three to life imprisonment and four to lesser terms.

The new film is based largely on Jack El-Hai's 2013 book, *The Nazi and the Psychiatrist*, a nonfiction work that traces the investigation by US army doctor Douglas Kelley into the psychological state and fitness for trial of the defendants, particularly Herman Göring, the number two figure in the Nazi regime after Adolf Hitler.

A film that attempts to depict the Nuremberg Trials is certainly welcome at this moment, when genocide and fascist dictatorship have once more begun to threaten humanity. *Nuremberg* is very uneven as a depiction of a vital part of the history of the 20th century. While it suffers from very serious weaknesses, it is also necessary to recognize several important strengths.

Chief among these are the scenes of the actual trial, including its concluding days. Staged courtroom scenes are effectively and rapidly intercut with 80-year-old black-and-white film footage. These sequences include the screening of imagery from the recently liberated concentration camps. As the names Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and others flash across the screen, we see the huge piles of corpses as well as a few survivors near death. The film audience is stunned, as the spectators were during the original trial. Humanity had never seen anything like this. The depths of Nazi barbarism began, in 1946, to seep into mass consciousness. The Nuremberg Trials were instrumental in telling the world about the crimes of German imperialism.

It is one thing to graphically expose this history, however, and quite another to *make sense* of it. The principal problem with *Nuremberg* is that it looks for the motive force of the Nazi Holocaust largely in the psychology of the individual leaders, and not in the acute social contradictions that roiled Europe, and especially Germany, in the wake of World War One.

Consequently, *Nuremberg* cannot explain why the Nazi leaders were capable of such monstrous crimes. The most that director Vanderbilt (of the prominent Vanderbilt family) can say, in an interview, referring to the main plot of the movie, is that "Kelley had the highest-ranking living Nazi dropped in his lap. It was an opportunity to dissect the nature of evil."

The International Military Tribunal was simultaneously an important juridical innovation—the first systematic attempt to make individual political and military leaders legally accountable for the crime of waging aggressive war—and a deeply compromised, partial instrument of the victorious imperialist powers, principally the United States.

The Tribunal broke with earlier legal practice by allowing for the first time those convicted of planning and waging aggressive war to be punished in a court of law. As Robert H. Jackson (Michael Shannon), the US Supreme Court Justice and lead prosecutor at Nuremberg, declares in his opening statement: "We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants today is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow."

The trials were, nevertheless, inseparable from the postwar settlement shaped by the victorious Allies. The political and strategic aims of these powers, especially the US, determined which crimes (and criminals) would be prosecuted and which would not. As the WSWS explained some years ago, the trials

> 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.

Nuremberg served several immediate political purposes: to legitimize the postwar settlement, and to establish conditions for the rehabilitation of German imperialism, including the rehabilitation of former Nazis, as part of what was almost immediately to become the Cold War against the Soviet Union

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and the imperialist drive against the threat of socialist revolution.

Vanderbilt's film focuses on the interaction between Göring and Kelley. As portrayed in the film, Douglas Kelley (Rami Malek), is newly arrived in Nuremberg (which the Allies have bombed to rubble) from another assignment in which he was treating what would now be called PTSD among American soldiers. He meets Sergeant Howie Triest (Leon Woodall), who introduces him in turn to Colonel Burton Andrus (John Slattery), the commandant of a prison facility. Andrus informs Kelley he will be responsible for assessing the psychological fitness for trial of a number of leading Nazis, with Triest as his translator.

The film actually opens with Göring (Russell Crowe) surrendering to American troops. A portly figure wearing a clean white uniform, holding his field marshal's baton and accompanied by a driver and several pieces of luggage, the Nazi leader stands apart from and in glaring contrast to a line of bedraggled refugees.

Göring is the highest-ranking Nazi to fall into Allied hands, after Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler had each committed suicide. Closely associated with Hitler and his inner circle ever since the failed Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, he founded the Gestapo [Nazi secret police] after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, and is believed to have been responsible for the Reichstag Fire, used by the Nazis to illegalize opposition and set up a brutal one-party dictatorship that would lead straight to Auschwitz.

Crowe's performance as Göring and also those of Malek and Shannon are particularly strong. Crowe depicts Göring as clever, even charming up to a point, anxious not to incriminate himself, but also defending the Nazi regime as necessary to raise up the German nation after the devastating defeat in the First World War and in the Versailles Treaty.

Other leading Nazis in the film include Rudolf Hess (Andreas Pietschmann), the former Deputy Führer who flew without Hitler's permission to England seeking a peace agreement and alliance against the USSR in 1941. Hess claims amnesia but immediately raises his arm in the Nazi salute as soon as he sees Goring.

There is also Julius Streicher (Dieter Riesle), the infamous editor of *Der Stürmer*, an antisemitic rag so filthy that many leading Nazis refused to read it. In a conversation between Göring and Kelley, Göring describes Streicher, the owner of what may have been the largest pornography collection in the world, as a dirty old man, the social type who bothers people in public parks, in a line lifted almost verbatim from Rebecca West's report on the Nuremberg Trials, contained in her book *A Train of Powder* (1955).

Although Kelley is not shown as developing any political or moral sympathy for Göring, he agrees to transmit letters between the Nazi and his wife and his young daughter. At this point the story becomes somewhat embellished. These scenes, though based on fact, are developed somewhat sentimentally, with hugs and sympathy all around.

The purpose of this is unclear. Is it to humanize the Nazi leader, to show that he had a normal family life? Or is it that Kelley is being taken in by Göring? These are some of the "psychologizing" moments in the film that don't take us very far in understanding the Nazi leaders and why they did what they did.

Even more fictionalized is the plot line of Kelley leaking information to a journalist, and then being dismissed from the trial, but only after turning over voluminous notes to the prosecution. In fact, the real Kelley was promoted after his examination of Göring and others. The aim here is probably to make the story more "dramatic" and thus commercially viable, but the changes also serve to focus attention on the personal and psychological factors, to the exclusion of any broader examination of Nazi rule.

At the conclusion, Jackson and his British fellow prosecutor use Kelley's notes to trick Göring into admitting he would have remained loyal to Hitler even if he had known about the atrocities, a knowledge he consistently denied. Göring and the others are convicted, with Göring cheating the hangman's noose by taking a cyanide capsule.

There is far too much attention given to speculation about the impact that Göring may have had on Kelley. The final frame of the film informs us that Kelley, who suffered from alcoholism, took his own life in 1958, also using a cyanide capsule.

To his credit, Kelley did apparently recognize that the Nazis were not simply special products of German culture or the creations of an abstract "evil." On a 1947 book tour for *22 Cells at Nuremberg*, the account he had written of his time at the trial, Kelley declared: "…I am quite certain that there are people even in America who would willingly climb over the corpses of half of the American public if they could gain control of the other half, and these are the people…who are utilizing the rights of democracy in an anti-democratic fashion."

There is also a brief scene towards the end of the film in which Kelley is removed from a radio station, accused of "trashing" America, after telling the on-air audience that the United States was not immune from the rise of fascism.

This, along with the scenes of the trial itself, resonates deeply today. It is difficult for the viewer to hear these words and to see the footage of the concentration camps without thinking of the scenes from Gaza for the past two years, and to watch Crowe play the conman Göring without thinking of the Fascist conman in the White House.

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