

## Holocaust Film before the *Holocaust*: DEFA, Antifascism and the Camps

### Les films sur l'Holocauste avant l'Holocauste : la DEFA, l'antifascisme et les camps

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Résumé de l'article

Très peu de films représentant l'Holocauste ont été produits avant les années 1970. Cette période a souvent été considérée, sur le plan international, comme une période de désaveu, tant politique que cinématographique, de la catastrophe ayant frappé les Juifs. Outre les productions hollywoodiennes *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1960), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer, 1961) et *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet, 1965), on a souvent fait remarquer que peu de films est- ou ouest-européens ont émergé de ce paysage politique et culturel, ce qui a été perçu par plusieurs comme une incapacité ou une réticence à traiter du sujet. Le présent article fait de cette présomption son principal enjeu en s'intéressant à des films tournés par la DEFA entre 1946 et 1963, dans la zone soviétique de Berlin-Est et en Allemagne de l'Est, et qui ont pour objet la persécution des Juifs sous le Troisième Reich.

# Holocaust Film before the *Holocaust*: DEFA, Antifascism and the Camps

David Bathrick

## ABSTRACT

The period prior to the 1970s has frequently been portrayed internationally as one of public disavowal of the Jewish catastrophe politically and cinematically and as one in which there was a dearth of filmic representations of the Holocaust. In addition to the Hollywood productions *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1960), Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) and Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1965), one often spoke of just a few East and West European films emerging within a political and cultural landscape that was viewed by many as unable or unwilling to address the subject. This article takes issue with these assumptions by focusing on feature films made by DEFA between 1946 and 1963 in East Berlin's Soviet Zone and in East Germany which had as their subject matter the persecution of Jews during the Third Reich.

*Voir le résumé français à la fin de l'article*

The phrase in my title “Holocaust Film before the *Holocaust*” is intended to highlight the role played by American mass culture in coining the word “Holocaust” as a global term for Nazi extermination of the Jews. While the use of Holocaust for Nazi genocide by historians at the Yad Vashem research institute in Israel in the 1950s and by American-based writers such as Bruno Bettelheim and Elie Wiesel in the 1960s had contributed to its limited acceptance within print culture,<sup>1</sup> it was the NBC miniseries *Holocaust* in April of 1978 that pushed it beyond the more narrow spheres of ethnic or academic discourse.<sup>2</sup> With viewing audiences of 100 million in the United States and at least as many in Europe, the more localized memorial recollec-

tions of Jewish extermination took on the status of a global memory. The dramatic increase in transnational media representations in the 1990s (Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* [1993], the building of the Holocaust Memorial on the Mall in Washington and the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*) only contributed to confirming the broadcast of the NBC miniseries as a cultural and political watershed.

What were the contours of that structural shift? In her now encyclopaedic study of film and the Holocaust, Annette Insdorf (2002, p. 245) describes that turning point in relation to her own work:

When I began exploring how films have grappled with the Holocaust in 1979, there were merely a few dozen titles to warrant attention. As a daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors, I wanted to bring relatively unknown foreign films to attention, and to assess how American movies had dealt with the legacy of World War II. The word "Holocaust" was just coming into common usage, thanks to the NBC miniseries of 1978. It never occurred to me that, by the year 2001, films about the Nazi era and its Jewish victims would be so numerous as to constitute a genre—including consistent Oscar winners—nor did I foresee how this genre would be part of a wider cultural embracing of the Shoah.

A word, a cinematic genre, a memorial global discourse: looking back on the twenty-eight-year period since 1979, we often find the *Holocaust* miniseries depicted as having broken through a thirty-year barrier of silence and even repression to provide access to that event at both culturally specific (Jewish-American identity; German identification with the victims) and more universal levels.<sup>3</sup> On the other side of the NBC-*Holocaust* divide, the period prior to the 1970s has frequently been portrayed internationally as one of relative public disavowal of this event politically and cinematically—as one in which there has been a dearth of filmic representations of the Holocaust. In addition to the Hollywood productions *The Diary of Anne Frank* by George Stevens (1959), *Judgement at Nuremberg* by Stanley Kramer (1961) and *The Pawnbroker* by Sidney Lumet (1965), one often spoke of just a few East and West European films in a political

and cultural landscape that was viewed by many as unable or simply unwilling to address the subject.

While focusing for the most part on East German cinematic treatment of the Holocaust, this essay also situates itself more broadly within an area of research that is concerned with correcting the notion that the first twenty-five years of post-WW II film were, with few exceptions, devoid of feature or documentary films that dealt with the consequences of Nazi destruction of European Jewry.<sup>4</sup>

### **I. Can There Be a Jewish Holocaust in Official East German Antifascism?**

One of the least recognized national cinemas when it comes to the topic of the Shoah was that of the East German DEFA. This has been due in part to the manner in which those writing about the period have chosen to designate the object of their study. Indeed, discussions of films in the Soviet Zone and subsequently in the GDR that dealt with Jewish persecution were often subsumed under larger generic categories such as “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (coming to terms with the past), “the anti-fascist past in DEFA films” (Mückenberger 1999), “rubble films” (Schandley 2001) or “representations of Jews and antifascism in East German film.”<sup>5</sup> While such contextual assignments are helpful as a way of understanding the larger historical discursive frameworks in which individual cinematic texts have evolved and found meaning, they have often served as well to obfuscate if not repress the issue of Jewish annihilation lying buried beneath the surface of such programmatic formulations. And this is so precisely because the overriding rubrics themselves remain critically unexamined.

My exploration of a select number of DEFA films made between 1946 and 1963 which deal specifically with Jewish persecution and/or locate their narrative in Nazi concentration camps or Nazi incarceration ghettos focuses on the following questions: What was the political, cultural and ideological context in which this cinema was produced and how might it help us understand and interpret individual films? In what ways might we read these films anew given our post-Berlin Wall his-

torical knowledge of life in Buchenwald and Auschwitz, as well as of the Allied liberation of the camps in 1945? How do these films compare stylistically and thematically with other generically similar films being made in Europe and the United States during the same period? Finally, how, viewed from a broader perspective, did these early films help forge what Aleida Assmann (1999) has called our cultural memory of this period?

Relatively little public discussion or media representation of Jewish extermination took place in Europe or the United States in the first decade after the war. Initial attempts by the Allies in the three Western zones to confront the larger German populace with what they defined as “war atrocities” were so ineptly carried out that the occupiers soon gave up in despair.<sup>6</sup> Given their failures of communication at the level of propaganda and “re-education” and faced with the refusal on the part of the Adenauer administration to accept, beyond reparations to Israel, any real responsibility for the crimes in question,<sup>7</sup> the Western powers soon decided that their need to make Germany a central bulwark against Communism would only be disrupted by forced efforts on the part of the Allies to work through the past.

While the politics of occupation and transition to statehood were somewhat different in the Soviet Zone of Occupation, the fundamental attitude towards the Jewish catastrophe and Jewish survivors in the initial decade of the GDR (1949–59) was not. For instance, like West Germany, “[d]uring the 1950s the Holocaust did not exist in East German historiography” (Fox 1999, p. 59), nor was it very present in the innumerable public memorial celebrations honouring the victims who perished in the onslaught of Nazi terror. The reasons for this lacuna grew in the first instance out of political exigency, both domestic and transnational. Here we should mention, but not elaborate upon, the Soviet-inspired “anti-Zionist” campaign of the 1950s which, in the wake of the notoriously anti-Semitic Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia in December of 1952, led to strong reprisals against and even incarceration of Jews and also non-Jews in the GDR.<sup>8</sup> Many of them were being persecuted because they had attempted to raise the Holocaust question within the larger scenario of Nazi criminality: namely the ques-

tion about the special nature of Jewish extermination and the necessity of reparations as part of any “anti-fascist” remembrance.

These developments, of course, did not just emanate from post-war Soviet policies in Eastern Europe. They found their genesis as well in a foundational narrative at the core of post-war antifascism that by definition inaugurated the Soviet Union and its German communist allies as the primary victims of Nazi aggression, as the only source of active resistance and, by virtue of their “victorious struggle,” as the rightful founders of a state that would never let it happen again.<sup>9</sup> What this meant in turn for everyday praxis was a government-sponsored memorial culture that portrayed life in concentration camps with a focus primarily on the heroism and victimization of political prisoners. At the centre of this scenario were the communist cells that resisted and, as was alleged apocryphally in the case of Buchenwald, ultimately liberated their less motivated and thoroughly unorganized cohorts—be they criminals, Sinti and Roma, religious prisoners, gays or Jews. Canonical as well was the invocation that declared anti-Communism, not race, to be the major component of Nazi ideology; and that defined anti-Semitism as simply a tool of manipulation emanating from the profit motive of the capitalist ruling class.

Given the scenario sketched out above, one is tempted to ask whether there was, or ever could have been, a Jewish Holocaust in official East German antifascism. Can a master narrative of the Nazi concentration camps that reduces the status of the Jewish victim to just another bit player in the parable of the triumphant and ultimately redemptive march to East German socialism really have anything to do with what transpired in the industrial murder factories of Treblinka, Majdanik, Sobibor or Auschwitz? Or, for that matter, in the Buchenwald sub-camp known as *das kleine Lager* (the small camp), where a majority of the prisoner population was made up of Sinti and Roma, Slavs, Hungarians and Jews who were suffering and dying from physical abuse, overwork, malnutrition and disease.

Finally, in this discussion of the first seventeen years of DEFA films with respect to their responses to the Holocaust, it will be

important to make distinctions between films that referenced in any way Nazi anti-Jewish measures, on the one hand, and those films that dealt more explicitly with Jewish extermination and the camps on the other. Concerning the first category, it can certainly be said that DEFA at its very outset made a number of significant films.

## II. Representations of Jewish Persecution in Early DEFA

### Films: 1946–50

The beginnings of an early German post-war cinema in the Soviet Zone resulted from the fact that the Soviets took a very different position from their counterparts in the West. From the very beginning, Soviet policy proposed that the remnants of the Nazi film industry at Babelsberg be taken over and revamped into a major studio in order to re-educate the Germans into new ways of thinking and behaving. Thus, in contrast to the Americans in particular, they were much more willing to use the film medium generally—newsreels, documentary films and feature films—for purposes of enlightenment, propaganda and entertainment. This led in turn, already by the end of 1945, to the founding of DEFA (Deutsche Film-AG); then, the first post-war German feature film, *The Murderers Are among Us* (*Die Mörder sind unter uns*), starring Hildegard Knef and directed by Wolfgang Staudte, premiered on 15 October 1946 in the *Staatsoper* in East Berlin. This film tells the story of a returning officer named Dr. Hans Mertens (Ernst Wilhelm Borchert) who has served as an officer and medic in the Wehrmacht and because of his experience is unable to believe in humanity and adjust to post-war life. He ends up sharing an apartment with Susanne Wallner (Hildegard Knef), who has returned from a concentration camp. Mertens soon discovers his former superior officer Ferdinand Brückner (Arno Paulson), who had ordered the execution of an entire village of innocent civilians in Poland, now living a normal life as a successful businessman. Hans seeks to avenge these deaths through vigilante execution of his former captain. Susanne thwarts his plans at the last moment and the film ends with an appeal to the justice system to convict the “murderers in their midst.”

Two things are particularly significant about this first post-war German film in light of its attempt to deal with Germany's past. The first was its willingness to treat a subject that soon was to become taboo, most specifically in Adenauer's West Germany of the 1950s. Much has been written about *The Murderers* as a film which not only breaks with the political and cinematic past, but which does so in a way that takes direct issue with the war crimes of the Third Reich. From today's perspective, this claim might seem more than a bit overstated. The montage editing, fuzzy images and hazy lighting of the brief execution scenes—presumably staged as representing the disoriented memories of the haunted protagonist Mertens—make it difficult if not impossible to establish the nature of either perpetrators or victims. Did Mertens himself actually commit a crime, or was he just a bystander? Ultimately, we do not know. This film has also been autobiographically positioned as a work which is deeply concerned with working through the past of the director himself. "I had to make that film," Staudte (1969, p. 74) stated, "caught in the horror of the final days of war it was an act of self-understanding, my own spiritual settling of accounts (*Abrechnung*) with fascism and its ideology."

A second, more disturbing aspect of *The Murderers* concerns the problematic effacement of Susanne Wallner as its only bona fide victim. Where the expressionist lighting functions to depict the depths of the protagonist's melancholia—the jagged facial and spiritual scars that lead Mertens into a deep and desperate kind of repetition compulsion—it is the unrelentingly front-lit beatific visage of Susanne that provides a moment of utopian overcoming. Hans Blumenberg (1993) once wrote that pure light is an "absolute metaphor," and that is surely one of its functions in regards to this figure. Susanne has been effaced of her history, character, ethnicity—certainly of her psyche; neither do we learn, nor does the tortured narcissist Mertens have any interest in knowing, about her past in a concentration camp, for here she is a vehicle for something else. It is the idealization of Susanne as pure signifier—seen close up and with spot lighting, like the blonde and blue-eyed icons of UFA or even Metro Goldwyn Mayer which would seem to claim for itself and those



around it a means for overcoming. We don't know whether or not Susanne Wallner is Jewish. Other than the one offhand remark that she was sent to the camps "because of her father," she has no past.

While the effacement or absence of Jewish victims of the Holocaust in early post-war cinema was the norm in much of international cinema, there were several interesting exceptions in the thirty-three DEFA films made between 1946 and 1950. One early movie that did deal directly with Jewish victims in Nazi Germany was *Marriage in the Shadows* (*Ehe im Schatten*, 1947), made by Kurt Maetzig, whose Jewish mother committed suicide in Nazi Germany, in part because Maetzig's father divorced his mother so as not to get himself politically entangled. Thus, like Wolfgang Staudte's *The Murderers*, *Marriage* is partly autobiographical, for it is about a marriage between a German Jew and a German non-Jew where there was not a divorce.

*Marriage* tells the true story of the accomplished and popular screen actor in Nazi Germany, Joachim Gottschalk, and his Jewish wife Meta, both of whom, like many German Jews in the late 1930s, ended up committing suicide rather than leaving the country or each other.<sup>10</sup> This highly melodramatic fictional film<sup>11</sup> also effectively depicts the deterioration of the status of Jews in Berlin and the opportunism of most Germans, who just looked the other way. Its documentary-like footage includes the initial prohibition actions taken by the Nazis already in 1933 forbidding actors to work in theatres; the effect of Nuremberg race laws in 1935 forbidding German Jews and non-Jews to marry or commingle; and dramatically violent footage of the Kristallnacht, when on 9 November 1938 thousands of Jewish synagogues and businesses were attacked and destroyed and hundreds of Jews beaten and killed in a government-organized pogrom. What is perhaps most significant is that *Marriage* premiered on 3 October 1947 in all four sectors of Berlin at the same time, the only DEFA film permitted to do so, and that within four years 12 million Germans had seen it. This figure was more than double the number of any other DEFA film for this period, all the more astounding given that over 50 per cent of the movie houses in Berlin had been destroyed in the war.

While *Marriage* was the only film to explore in depth Jewish persecution in the Third Reich in relation to deportation and the camps, other DEFA films did focus on anti-Jewish measures and German anti-Semitism. *The Blum Affair* (*Die Affäre Blum*, 1948), directed by Erich Engel, depicts a criminal conspiracy in the Weimar period, in which a Jewish industrialist is accused of murder and the local judiciary conspires against him because he is a liberal and a Jew. Wolfgang Staudte's film *Rotation* (1949) portrays ordinary non-Jewish citizens in the Third Reich who, once close friends with their Jewish neighbours next door, simply close their curtains when those same neighbours are deported. Finally, *Council of the Gods* (*Rat der Götter*, 1950)—with a screenplay by Friedrich Wolf, music by Hanns Eisler and directed by Kurt Maetzig—portrays the responsibility of the IG-Farben company for the production of gas for the extermination policies in the death camps at Auschwitz and elsewhere.

### III. Early Holocaust Films outside of East Germany

Films treating anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution such as the early DEFA productions (1946–50) were also being made in the Western zones of Germany and in Eastern Europe, although not in such great number. Artur Brauner's *Morituri* premiered in Hamburg in 1948 and was the first German feature film to portray a concentration camp. The same year saw the appearance of a Yiddish film called *Long is the Road* (*Lang ist der Weg*, 1948), directed by Herbert B. Fredersdorf and Marek Goldstein and made in the American Zone in Bavaria. *Long is the Road* tells the story of a Polish family deported from their Warsaw apartment to Auschwitz in 1942 and their struggle after the war to reunite. Moving from one displaced persons camp to another and from Poland to the American Zone in Germany, the protagonist David Jelin (Israel Becker) first meets and marries the orphaned German Jew Dora Berkowicz (Bettina Moissi) and finally locates his mother Hanne Jelin (Berta Litwina). The subtle use of documentary clips and the sophisticated editing are particularly effective, as is its use of images to bring into the film at the level of synecdoche dimensions of the camp experience that are not there diegetically but all the more present because of the

power of visual suggestion. Made and performed by many of the survivors themselves, *Long is the Road* is a film ahead of its time aesthetically.

Looking beyond Germany, the first and, until the 1960s, most important feature film to deal with the Holocaust set within the extermination camps was Polish director Wanda Jakubowska's landmark film *The Last Stage* (*Ostatni etap*, 1948).<sup>12</sup> The script was co-authored by the German writer Gerda Schneider and Jakubowska, who had been prisoners together in Auschwitz, where the film was shot on location. Its creation of a documentary look, enhanced through the film stock used and the employment of former prisoners playing bit parts, further promoted a sense of newsreel realism that would have a significant impact on such later Holocaust features as Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1960), Andrejz Munk's *The Passenger* (1963) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*; and be quoted explicitly in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955), George Stevens's *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Zica Mitrovic's German-Yugoslavian co-production *Witness from Hell* (*Zeugin aus der Hölle/Gorke Trave*, 1965–67).

The action of *The Last Stage* is located in the women's wing of Auschwitz-Birkenau and features a series of miniature dramas in which differing constellations of female inmates struggle to survive daily brutalization by the SS and the mostly Polish kapos. At the centre of the plot we find not one but four central characters: Marta Weiss (Barbara Drapinská), a Jewish prisoner, whose special status in the camp as translator enables her to be involved in active resistance and who dies a martyr's death at the end of the film; Eugenia (Tatjana Górecka), a Russian doctor, who is tortured to death because she tells the truth to a Red Cross delegation; Anna (Antonia Górecka), a German nurse who also resists and is removed by the SS because of it; and Helena (Wanda Bartówna), a Polish prisoner who gives birth upon arrival in the camps and following the murder of her baby by the SS becomes a figure of resistance.

Particularly relevant to a comparison with DEFA Holocaust films is Jakubowska's negotiation of the competing political discourses that she, as an Eastern European filmmaker, was pressed

to adhere to as she struggled to bring her controversial project to fruition. Official Party criticism of the original screenplay she submitted for approval to the artistic board of Film Polski insisted that it be revised so as to emphasize a “clearer message regarding the cause of the resistance” (Loew 2004, p. 83) as well as to eliminate the “endless images of atrocities against Jewish women and children, so unbearable to the public” (p. 81). Concerning the latter demand, to her credit Jakubowska refused to diminish the prominence of Jewish suffering in her screenplay. The repeated scenes of the selection and transportation of Jews directly into the gas chambers are among the strongest representations of Jewish genocide to appear anywhere in the Holocaust film canon. Jakubowska also transgressed official strictures, this time regarding a national discourse, in her numerous depictions of vicious Polish kapos, who were shown to be every bit as violent and punitive as the SS.

Turning to the issue of resistance, the final version of the screenplay did reveal increased struggle and political organization by the women in the camp. In the closing sequence of the film, as Stuart Liebman has emphasized, those heroics become “excessive” as *The Last Stage* capitulates to the thematic and aesthetic norms of classical Soviet socialist realism’s version of the happy end: “As the indefatigable Martha is led to the gallows, she manages to kick the oafish commandant off the platform, slits her wrists, and, before dying, delivers a ringing reminder to the Germans that they will lose the war. This occurs even as Soviet airplanes fly over in perfect formation as harbinger of things to come” (Liebmann and Quart 1997, p. 43). As I will note in my discussion of *Naked among Wolves* (*Nackt unter Wölfen*, 1963), *Kapo* (1960) and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the hyperbolic redemptive ending was to become a trope of Holocaust cinema, whether of the socialist realist or the Hollywood variety. The transformation of the Jewish Marta into a Polish communist resistance fighter clearly suggests an effacing of the Jewish catastrophe in the name of the emerging socialist cause.<sup>13</sup>

A third highly experimental work to appear in the 1950s, one “whose very shape challenged [and changed] existing visual lan-

guage” (Insdorf 2002, p. 136), was the French filmmaker Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog*. This thirty-five-minute documentary about Jewish deportation and extermination in the concentration camps was as much poetry as it was newsreel, shaped as well by an editing style that both reflects and elicits the contrapuntal rhythms—aesthetic and political—that are at the dialectical centre of the film.

Three aspects mark *Night and Fog* as a watershed in the history of Holocaust film. The first is that it became the memory trigger of the *Urbilder*, those primary images that were seen and not seen when the Nazi concentration camp film shown at the Nuremberg trials first shocked the world into awareness of the depth of Nazi devastation. Resnais concludes the film with footage from British, American and Russian military cameramen from camps such as Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen und Auschwitz. Since documentary footage from the camps had not been released publicly, this first screening of *Night and Fog* meant for almost all spectators an initial confrontation with “visual proof” of the enormity of the crimes.

A second important aspect of the film was that it dared to employ a modernist style to deal with this difficult subject in a manner that would evoke and at the same time challenge identificatory responses. It called forth emotional catharsis, but at the same time changed the rhythms of reception so as to elicit varying epistemological responses. Thus the style of *Night and Fog* is not just reflexive, distanced or non-realistic, but rather alternates from one aesthetic orientation to another. The voice of the narrator and Hanns Eisler’s occasionally twelve-tone soundscape similarly move from harmony to dissonance and occasionally into unsettling mixtures of the two.

Finally, Resnais’s now iconic work has to do with the way we read images of the concentration camps and what we are and are not provided by the voice-over narration. What we do not hear is any reference to Jewish victims, although nationalities are mentioned. Nor is there any distinction made between death camps and concentration camps. As indicated in my discussion of the very early *The Murderers Are among Us* above, the failure to mention Jews specifically was not unique to this film. With

the exception of the phrase “German Jews” in an extensive listing of national prisoner identities, the documentary *Nazi Concentration Camps* shown at the Nuremberg Trials also makes no mention of Jewish victims. What this lacuna does underline is the tendency of *Night and Fog* to universalize the Holocaust and its victims rather than to draw distinctions about their origins and fates. To that extent, as has been emphasized, “by fusing Buchenwald with Auschwitz-Birkenau, in blending the French deportees with those marked for Jewish genocide, Renais’s film appears today as a documentary of the 1950s” (Furman 2005, p. 72). Conversely, it should also be mentioned how *Night and Fog* introduces through its montage counterpoint a series of photographic and cinematic images that have since become established icons, serving as a global memory language for Jewish extermination: figures with Jewish stars being boarded onto freight cars and the little boy from the Warsaw ghetto with his hands in the air are two examples.

In conclusion, it should also be mentioned that in spite of East German composer Hanns Eisler’s prominent role as musical composer in the creation of *Night and Fog*, there was no extensive public screening of it in the GDR. DEFA did write a letter to Argos film in Paris saying that it had been deeply impressed by the film and that despite their displeasure with the Paul Celan translation of the commentary “very much want to distribute [it] on a massive scale in the GDR” (van der Knaap 2006). In addition, there are records of a separate GDR version with a translation of the voice-over by Henryk Keisch.

#### IV. *Nackt unter Wölfen* and Antifascist Mythmaking in the GDR

While the absence of official Holocaust remembrance of victims of the concentration camps was apparent in East Germany during much of the 1950s, things begin to change in 1958 when the government inaugurated the Buchenwald camp as the first of three “National Warning and Memorial Sites” (*Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätten*) dedicated to focusing “its themes of resistance on the heroic deeds of the communist fighters against fascism.”<sup>14</sup> There is of course no mention here of resistance

efforts by the many other prisoner groups. Nor are we asked to remember the large number of Jews in the Buchenwald work camp who were worked or starved to death simply on racial grounds.

It should be noted that during the same year that Buchenwald was inaugurated as a memorial site, the then unknown Bruno Apitz, who himself was a political prisoner in Buchenwald, published his celebrated concentration camp novel *Naked among Wolves*, which five years later was made into a DEFA film. Both novel and film tell the story of a three-year-old Polish-Jewish child, who is smuggled into Buchenwald in a suitcase by a Polish prisoner evacuated from Auschwitz in January of 1945. A series of prisoners takes responsibility for the boy, first hiding him in the camp depository, then in the garbage bin of the infirmary, and finally in a pigsty. Having gotten wind of this, the SS terrorize and intermittently torture the child's protectors in an attempt to locate the child.

Woven into this plot is a second major narrative about an illegal underground organization of mostly communist prisoners who are planning an armed uprising against their SS overseers. Things get complicated when a number of the leaders of that action also get involved with the efforts to save the child, forcing them at one point into a conflict around means and ends, calculation and feeling, discipline and spontaneity. They are rewarded for their decision not to choose one or the other (i.e. not to sacrifice the child for the salvation of the 50,000 other prisoners) by the happiest of redemptive endings: the child survives the ordeal unscathed when the communist conspirators overwhelm their guards and liberate the camp.

Unlike most of the historical novels that were published in the GDR, *Naked among Wolves* was neither Party-inspired nor even initially Party-desired. Apitz's application to the national writers' guild (*Schriftstellerverband*) for financial support to write his novel was turned down, in part because when he originally began the project fictional works dealing with concentration camps were not viewed by the authorities to be within the parameters of the official *Kulturpolitik*, but also because they did not feel that this unknown author was up to the task.<sup>15</sup>

Given the above, it is all the more ironic that the book, which sold over 400,000 copies in the first two years, together with its subsequent filming by Frank Beyer, were to provide the official Socialist Unity Party of the GDR with arguably its most legitimating foundational antifascist narrative.<sup>16</sup> *Naked among Wolves* was viewed as such on the basis of its mythical (in both senses of that word) account of the heroic rescue of “the Buchenwald child” and the ensuing communist-led “self-liberation” of the camp itself on 11 April 1945.

The project was deemed aesthetically foundational as well because both book and film came to represent for the cultural establishment “the very embodiment of socialist realism and humanism, which contained within it anticipated forms of socialist behaviour for the present day” (Emmerich 1996, p. 135). Thus, very much like the iconic status of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in the West at approximately the same time (also both as book and film), we have in the Apitz complex a work (partly autobiographical) written by a camp prisoner, also about a child in the Holocaust, whose power to elicit audience identification confers redemptive meaning on a state of human degradation that Hannah Arendt referred to as a *Zivilisationsbruch* (a rupture with civilization).

In the Beyer and Apitz film (Apitz wrote the screenplay as well) there is much that is historically authentic and worth remembering. The organization of the “red kapos” in key positions of authority did permit the communist prisoners to protect their own and even assert a modicum of resistance in the face of Nazi terror. Lutz Niethammer, in his study of communists in Buchenwald, writes that of the 50,000 who died in Buchenwald between 1937 and 11 April 1945 only 72 were German communists, which he characterizes as “the extraordinary success of the KPD as a survival community in the concentration camp” (Niethammer 1994, p. 45).

But there is a darker side to that survival, which is not portrayed in the film or the book and is only alluded to briefly in one sentence by the “Camp Elder” (*Lagerälteste*) Walter Krämer (Erwin Geschonneck, who himself had been a “Camp Elder” in Dachau): “Sometimes it occurs to me that we have really turned



into one hard-boiled society in here.”<sup>17</sup> As was the case throughout the concentration camp system, the figure of the kapo—red (political) and green (criminal) alike—was at best a collaborative nightmare of divided loyalties, caught between the brutalization of fellow prisoners and rapaciously carving out privileges and survival for oneself or one’s group. Primo Levi (1988, pp. 36-69) describes this and similar collaborative arrangements between the SS and prisoners as living in what he called “the grey zone,” and the post-war scholarship on Buchenwald documents that the red kapos were in some respects not much different. The communist-dominated camp police had indeed been guilty of atrocities just as the communist-staffed work office had wielded power over life and death in putting together transport lists that benefited their own cause. Similarly, the communists collaborated with, just as they had resisted, the SS and used their positions of power within the camp administration to privilege their own kind.<sup>18</sup>

The problem in this regard, however, is not that such egregious behaviour occurred, but that the sanitized heroics of the red kapos as depicted in the film seriously caricature, even as they profoundly suppress, the rapacity and abject horror of the survival mechanisms that existed in Buchenwald, in particular during the last year of the war—all in the name of a legend of legitimation.

This was not the only historical lacuna in *Naked among Wolves*. Lurking behind and obfuscated by the humanitarian struggle to save the one Jewish child was the unmentioned legacy of Jewish and other perceived *Untermenschen* suffering in the so-called “small camp” within earshot of the main camp. Here death was dealt through systematic starvation, forced labour, unattended disease (above all typhus) and further brutalization. Incarcerated here were many of the 700 ravaged, mostly Jewish children as well as the world of the *Muselmänner*, the prisoners named the walking dead so prominent in the newsreel footage of Buchenwald taken by General Patton’s Third Army at the liberation of the camp, footage that gives the lie to any notion of transcendent meaning.<sup>19</sup>

While ignored in both the novel and film versions of *Naked among Wolves*, the perspective of Jewish life and death in

Buchenwald did form the centre of the GDR writer and former inmate Fred Wander's (1997) collection of stories entitled *The Seventh Well* (*Der siebente Brunnen*). His pungent account of the liberation provides an antidote to the joyful ending in the Apitz story.<sup>20</sup> The dying and sickly residue of inhuman life situated in the midst of rotting corpses finds in Wander's narration a memorial legacy that is the larger truth of the "concentration camp universe" (pp. 109-12).

The difficulties that have arisen in the effort to depict cinematically characters and narratives that inhabit the "grey zone" may best be illustrated by a brief discussion of Gillo Pontecorvo's 1960 concentration camp film *Kapo*, made three years prior to *Naked*. This Italian-French co-production tells the story of the transformation of the sensitive Jewish teenager Edith (Susan Strasberg, who had originated the role of Anne Frank on Broadway) into a brutally fierce and tough-minded prisoner named Nicole. The heroine's metamorphosis from innocence to kapo<sup>21</sup> is depicted as a savage struggle for survival at any cost. Reduced to near starvation and beaten into submission, Nicole's ensuing behaviour is a response in kind: stealing a potato from a fellow prisoner leads to stealing socks off the feet of a murdered friend, which in turn has her offering sexual favours to the SS in return for privilege and power. As female kapo in a labour camp for political prisoners, she indulges in particularly brutal treatment of her underlings, day after day—until she suddenly falls in love with the Soviet political prisoner Sasha (Laurent Terzieff), is converted to the cause of collective revolt and sacrifices her life in an unsuccessful attempt to liberate the camp.

Some have criticized *Kapo* for its over-reliance on the generic codes of Hollywood melodrama.<sup>22</sup> One might fault it as well for its ideologically motivated folding of the Holocaust survival story into a socialist realist morality play about the beauty of collective death. While both criticisms seem valid at a purely thematic level, what remains unaddressed in such a coding is the larger question concerning the legitimacy and indeed the possibility of narrative itself. *Kapo's* *deus ex machina* in the final scenes foregrounds the redemptive re-conversion of the film's

“heroine.” Nicole re-assumes her Jewish identity as well as her status as a loving human being shortly before sacrificing herself. It points as well to a structural disavowal of the issues that lie at the heart of the “kapo story,” as related by survivors, within the larger non-narratives of those who did not survive—regardless of where they were located on any moral ladder. Of the *Muselmann* (Muslims), Primo Levi (1996, p. 90) once wrote that all those “who finish in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run to the sea” (my emphasis). His recounting of the prototypically “disquieting” stories of “Häftling-Director, the kapo, the cook, the nurse, the night guard and even the hut-sweeper” is scarcely more elevating, and as a potential tale of redemption highly “improbable,” he says. Here we find a story of the end of story, told, of course, as part of a survival narrative. Its discursive acknowledgment of such a contradiction is itself an act of mourning.

## Conclusion

In my discussion of Holocaust and film in the Soviet Zone and the GDR in immediate post-war Europe, a number of developments emerge that I would summarize as follows. The period between 1946 and 1949 saw the production of a number of films treating in various degrees anti-Semitism, Nazi criminality and Jewish persecution and deportation. The relative freedom of expression of this interim period, together with the access to trained artists and technicians from the ruins of Third Reich cinema, provided both high-quality productions as well as a transitional space for public discussion and reassessment.

The establishment of two German states in 1949 together with increased tensions due to the developing Cold War was accompanied by a tendency within both German systems to avoid dealing in any significant way with the issue of Jewish extermination. In the GDR this was exacerbated in 1952 by the anti-Semitic trials against Jewish Party officials and against those non-Jews who fought for reparation payments for Jewish “victims of fascism.” Only with the emergence of a memorial culture at the end of the decade did changes begin to occur.

Konrad Wolf's *Stars* (*Sterne*, co-produced with Bulgaria in 1959) tells the story of the Nazi deportation of Greek Jews from Saloniki in 1943, a move that calls forth an act of resistance on the part of a German soldier who has fallen in love with one of the deportees. Wolf's development of a new film language, his command of sound, image, text and acting, set a new standard for Holocaust filmmaking and in so doing provided an eastern alternative to George Stevens's classical Hollywood version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* that appeared the same year in the West. *Stars* also helped pave the way for the making of East Germany's first major film about the concentration camps, *Naked among Wolves*.

In comparing that latter work with other Holocaust films outside of Germany during this early period, it is important to consider the historical contingencies that determine their contextual meanings. The fact that Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* was able to place Jewish extermination, at least at the beginning of the film, at the centre of the narrative, whereas Beyer and Apitz's focus on the red kapos in *Naked among Wolves* erased any such focus, had much to do with the two periods in which they were made. For the Polish film, a still-dominant indigenous national cinema authority offered leeway for navigating areas of ideological conflict with the occupying Soviet powers. The Jewish question had not become entirely secondary to the national and Soviet questions; nor was it yet elided with the notion of Zionism. In addition, the momentary post-war experimental freedom permitted this avant-garde filmmaker of the 1930s a space to avoid some of the pitfalls of socialist realism.

The production of *Naked among Wolves* in the GDR of the 1960s was a very different story. Its programmatic focus on the visualization of Apitz's novel was aimed at further promoting the myth of East German antifascism at a time subsequent to the building of the Berlin Wall, when such foundational legends were deemed vital for the stability of the country. And what were the prevailing ideological paradigms that were translated into the narrative patterns of this camp film? The Polish writer Czeslov Milosz's well-known formula concerning the communist depiction of concentration camps offers a salient answer in

this regard: “(1) prisoners must be seen as members of clandestine organizations; (2) the communists must appear as leaders of these organizations; (3) all Russian prisoners must be distinguished by their moral force and eloquence; and (4) prisoner conduct should be dictated by their political stance” (quoted in Liebman 1998, p. 196). Certainly the adherence of *Naked among Wolves* to such a model marks it as a canonical, if formulaic example of socialist realist aesthetics.

Yet as much as there were clear contextual differences shaping these films due to the time and place in which they appeared, one nevertheless finds striking similarities among them at the level of what I would call their generic deep structure. For example, what is notable about the Hollywood production *The Diary of Anne Frank*, DEFA's *Naked among Wolves* and the independent European film *Kapo* is the extent to which all three of these works, despite their varying national, cultural, political and ideological encodings, are deeply invested in representations of the Holocaust which lend to that event a sense of redemption and *Sinnstiftung* (the endowment of life with meaning). For instance, in all three cases the concluding sequence is staged as an uplifting message that seeks to transcend, and in two cases even invalidate, the real existing horror of the events being depicted. In the Anne Frank film, the screenplay version bowdlerizes the original diary by taking the now famous but also painfully ironic lines “because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart” (Frank 1997) from an earlier entry and placing them at the end of the film as a beatific credo spoken just as the SS arrives to deport the families.<sup>23</sup> The political kapo Nicole in Pontecorvo's film is transfigured into sainthood (and reinstated as a Jew) in the final scenes as she dies a very Christian-like martyr's death in an unsuccessful attempt to help the Russian war prisoners to escape. The ending of *Naked among Wolves* finds Beyer and Apitz going beyond Apitz's novel to perform a historically apocryphal self-liberation of Buchenwald by the heroic communist prisoners, one which includes the salvation as well of the beatific Buchenwald child.

What these epiphany-like closures have in common, beyond the imposition of an upbeat resolution in the face of irresolute

catastrophe, is a tendency towards instantiating the iconic: “In many regards Anne Frank, that is to say her diary and its adaptation by various media, have become a symbol for the Holocaust” (Levy and Sznajder 2007, p. 76). Iconic images express an aura of timelessness and a lack of spatial specificity. Being limited in number and often repeated, they achieve the status of a global—some would say universal—language.

What the creation of icons lent to a number of the films that I have been discussing was an eliding of the very real and categorical differences among the types of concentration camps or of the experiences of various ethnic, national or gender groups in the name of the universal victim. In *Naked among Wolves* the Polish-Jewish child survivor is only referred to as a Jew by the SS, who consistently call him *einen Judenbalg* (a Jewish brat). At one point a German prisoner is admonished sternly by a Polish prisoner for even calling him a Pole. What was to be universalized and thereby memorialized in this film was the image of the political prisoner as resister (not victim) struggling under the aegis of the triumphant international leadership of the red kapos. In this scenario the world of diseased and murdered prisoners of the small camp remained invisible.

The transformation of Anne Frank from an exiled, assimilated German-Jewish teenager into a poster child for victims of the Second World War also included a re-fashioning of identity and a disavowal of her fate. The original diary was heavily edited, some say bowdlerized, first by Anne Frank’s father and then as it moved from book publication to the stage (Broadway) and finally into film.<sup>24</sup> The end result in the case of the play and the film was an erasure of her Jewishness, her budding sexuality and her occasional anti-German diatribes, together with a refusal—in the choice of a happy and hopeful ending—to deal with the post-diary issues raised by the murder of Anne in Bergen-Belsen simply because she was a Jew.

The 1960s saw important changes occurring in the area of what we now call Holocaust memory. Most prominent in this regard was the emergence of Jewish victims into the foreground of discussions about victimization both as an issue for historians as well as the subject matter of media representation. The broad

impact of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt of 1963–65 certainly played a role in this regard. While in both cases the Nazi perpetrators were the ones in the dock and at the centre of attention—Eichmann in the first and twenty-two former SS guards who worked in Auschwitz in the second—these public trials began a process in which Nazi war crimes as a general category became bifurcated. What resulted was, on the one hand, the notion of war crimes against various national, ethnic, social and religious groups; and on the other, the genocidal Nazi campaign to exterminate the Jews of Europe. Not surprisingly, it was during this time as well that the term Holocaust emerged as a signifier for the latter category.

The films I have dealt with in the period prior to 1965 are part of an important archive precisely because of their hybrid status. Forged at a time when the issue of Jewish extermination was understood as simply a part of what happened in the war and which, for different reasons, one did not talk about (whether in Israel, Europe or the United States), they nevertheless, by virtue of the images imparted and stories told, were able to bear witness *avant la lettre* as it were—before the coining of the word Holocaust. For despite their shortcomings, as seen today, what these films also collectively represent is a considerable step forward in daring even to inaugurate a cinematic memory of this event.

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#### NOTES

1. Gary Weissmann (2004, p. 24) cites Wiesel as “primarily responsible for establishing the term” in the United States. While this is certainly true for the survivor literature and academic discourse, it is not the case for usage in the more general public sphere.

2. For an account of the impact of the TV series *Holocaust* in the United States see Lilianthal 1995. In writing about the impact in Germany, Martina Thiele (2000, p. 18) also emphasizes the linguistic dimension when she writes: “It was the U.S. series *Holocaust* that first gave the Germans a name for that, which up to that time had been referred to with the Nazi non-word the ‘Final Solution.’”

3. Peter Novick, in his path-breaking *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999, p. 209), says the following about the reception of Holocaust in the United States:

“Without doubt the most important moment in the entry of the Holocaust into general American consciousness was NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* . . . [M]ore information about the Holocaust was imparted to more Americans over those four nights than over all the preceding thirty years.”

4. Publications which have dealt with this period include Thiele 2000; Fehrenbach 1995; Schenk 1994; Hoffmann and Schobert 1989; Deutsches Filminstitut 2001; Pleyer 1965; Becker and Schöll 1995; Schandley 2001.

5. Frank Stern, “A Cinema of Subversive Contradictions: Representations of Jews and Antifascism in East German Film.” <[www.umass.edu/defa/filmtour/sternessay.shtml](http://www.umass.edu/defa/filmtour/sternessay.shtml)>

6. Under the auspices of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a twenty-two-minute compilation documentary on the concentration camps, entitled *Death Mills*, produced by Hanus Berger and re-edited by Billy Wilder, was screened to German audiences throughout the American zone and parts of Berlin. These highly publicized commercial showings were reportedly met with a mixture of horror, shock, guilt, revulsion and a growing refusal to accept what was perceived as enemy propaganda and an accusation of collective guilt.

7. See Herf 1997 (chapters 2 and 3) for an excellent discussion of the failure to deal with the past in the Federal Republic in the 1950s.

8. See Herf 1997 (pp. 125-136).

9. For a more elaborate discussion of antifascism as a foundational narrative of the GDR see Bathrick 1995 (pp. 16-18) and Jeffrey Herf’s discussion “German Communism’s Master Narratives of Antifascism” (1997, pp. 13-39).

10. The film was based on the unpublished “film novelle” *Es wird schon nicht so schlimm* by the NS film director and actor Hans Schweikert. For more information about the fate of the Gottschalk family see Liebe 1992.

11. On viewing the film, Bertolt Brecht was said to be surprised that “one could manage to make out of material like that such a sentimental film” (Mückenberger and Jordan 1994, p. 25).

12. The canonical dimensions of *The Last Stage* are emphasized in the title and the analysis in Hanno Loew’s article “The Mother of All Holocaust Films? Wanda Jakubowska’s Auschwitz Trilogy” (2004).

13. See in this regard Omar Bartov’s discussion of *The Last Stage* in his *The “Jew” in Cinema: From The Golom to Don’t Touch my Holocaust* (2005, p. 173), where he argues that “although there was indeed an organized Polish resistance in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the only recorded uprising that occurred there was the rebellion of the Jewish Sonderkommando in the crematoria.”

14. Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur des Landes Brandenburg (ed.), *Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten für die Verfolgten des NS-Regimes. Perspektiven, Kontroversen und internationale Vergleiche* (quoted in Fox 1999, p. 41). See also Oversch 1995 (pp. 261-328).

15. See Niden 1997 (p. 100).

16. That the novel *Nackt unter Wölfen* “constituted a foundational myth” for the GDR is also the persuasively argued central thesis of a recent book by Bill Niven entitled *The Buchenwald Child: Truth, Fiction, and Propaganda* (2007, p. 122).

17. See the interview of Erwin Geschonneck by Thomas Heise entitled “Widerstand und Anpassung—Überlebensstrategie” (1988, pp. 555-69). Here he describes in detail the difficulties he had as a kapo trying to stay “clean,” i.e. walking the line between working with the SS and not having to betray his own (p. 556).

18. See Niethammer 1994 (pp. 360-65) and Niven 2007 (pp. 48-84).



19. See the vivid description of the deplorable conditions in the “small camp” documented by the American soldiers who liberated Buchenwald in Niethammer 1994 (pp. 84-97).
20. Bill Niven (2007, p. 197) in *The Buchenwald Child* goes so far as to say that *The Seventh Well* “challenged the right of *Naked among Wolves* to dictate the way in which the Nazi past is remembered.”
21. Marrus (1987, p. 129) defines the Kapo in the following manner: “The Nazis . . . empowered camp elders, clerks, block leaders, and so forth to supervise the inmates and assume primary responsibility for the routines of daily life.”
22. See Insdorf 2002 (p. 148).
23. As Tim Cole has pointed out in *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged and Sold* (1999, p. 42), “If there is one lesson that can be drawn from the Holocaust it is precisely that the optimism of Anne Frank was woefully misplaced.”
24. The script of the play and the screenplay for the movie were both written by Albert and Frances (Goodrich) Hackett.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### **Les films sur l'Holocauste avant l'Holocauste: la DEFA, l'antifascisme et les camps**

**David Bathrick**

Très peu de films représentant l'Holocauste ont été produits avant les années 1970. Cette période a souvent été considérée, sur le plan international, comme une période de désaveu, tant politique que cinématographique, de la catastrophe ayant frappé les Juifs. Outre les productions hollywoodiennes *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1960), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer, 1961) et *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet, 1965), on a souvent fait remarquer que peu de films est- ou ouest-européens ont émergé de ce paysage politique et culturel, ce qui a été perçu par plusieurs comme une incapacité ou une réticence à traiter du sujet. Le présent article fait de cette présomption son principal enjeu en s'intéressant à des films tournés par la DEFA entre 1946 et 1963, dans la zone soviétique de Berlin-Est et en Allemagne de l'Est, et qui ont pour objet la persécution des Juifs sous le Troisième Reich.