DISAPPOINTED HOPES FOR SPONTANEOUS MASS CONVERSIONS: GERMAN RESPONSES TO ALLIED ATROCITY FILM SCREENINGS, 1945-46

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Several hundred thousand Germans viewed an Allied atrocity film in the year after the Second World War had come to an end. By “atrocity film,” I mean one of the documentaries the Americans, Soviets, British, and French compiled from the footage that their army cameramen had shot during, or shortly after, the liberation of German death, concentration, and forced labor camps between July 1944 and May 1945. According to the results of my study, ten different such documentaries were shown to German audiences: four were American, three Soviet, two British, and one was a French film. At first, the Allies had planned to gather filmic documentation of German atrocities as evidence for Nazi war crime trials. And, in fact, the two most comprehensive documentaries at the time were those that the American and Soviet prosecution teams put together for the Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal (IMT) at Nuremberg. But when, during their advance through Germany in the spring of 1945, the Allied forces came across an unexpectedly large number of camps and subcamps, at which fleeing SS personnel had left behind countless unburied corpses and survivors in the most wretched condition, the military staffs decided without much discussion that not only German war criminals, but the world in general and the German population in particular should be confronted with the shocking visual evidence of German atrocities. Most people in the Allied countries had not taken the reports and rumors of systematic mass murder in German-occupied Europe seriously enough. Now it turned out that the news they had either heard or read had not been exaggerated, as many had preferred to believe: on the contrary, the crimes far exceeded human imagination. Photographs and film footage from the scenes of the crimes were to dispel, for everybody and for all time, any remaining doubts and elicit empathy for the victims that words had failed to evoke. Even more was at stake with German audiences: many Germans had lived in close proximity to camps or subcamps and had not been too concerned, it seemed, about the wrongs that were happening more or less in their midst. That they now claimed “not to have known” most Allied occupiers found hard to believe. The Allies therefore used their atrocity films

1 This article provides a summary of my recent book Beschämende Bilder: Deutsche Reaktionen auf alliierte Dokumentarfilme über befreite Konzentrationslager (Stuttgart, 2012).
not only to enlighten Germans but, and this is my central thesis, also to shame them.

Seldom before or afterwards have film viewers been as intensely observed, listened in on, questioned, surveyed, and evaluated as were the Germans to whom the Allies showed their atrocity films. The 21 defendants of the IMT trial at Nuremberg saw the American and Soviet prosecutors’ films under the attentive gaze of the international representatives of the press gathered in the courtroom; in many American and British POW camps, German prisoners of war were asked to give verbal or written comments after being forced to watch an atrocity film; and, in their zone of occupation, the American military government made the film Die Todesmühlen an essential part of their re-education program and employed social scientists to collect and interpret viewers’ reactions. The resulting set of unusually rich and varied primary sources on audience reception forms the basis of my analysis. Contrary to recent studies on collective memory, which have searched for common denominators in postwar Germans’ thought and silence about Nazi crimes, I am interested in the diversity of historical utterances on this subject. In particular, I seek to reconstruct the concrete conditions of film reception at the various screenings; I closely inspect the wide spectrum of extant responses; I interpret their wording; and I pay particular attention to the types of reports in which each of these responses has come down to us. The last point may sound like a matter of course. It is surprising, however, to what degree the rules of historical Quellenkritik have sometimes been neglected when it comes to morally sensitive questions like what Germans knew about Nazi mass murder and how they grappled with their disturbing past after the war.

Both contemporaries and historians of postwar Germany have treated German reactions to Allied atrocity films in the first postwar months as a kind of litmus test for Germans’ willingness to confront their Nazi past and even as indicators of the success or failure of so-called German Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Already at the time, some commentators were pessimistic, but especially in the academic literature one regularly finds the thesis that re-education via visual documentation of the liberated camps failed. The reason why scholars have adopted this thesis of Brewster Chamberlin’s, who first voiced it in regard to the effects of Todesmühlen — rather than examining the primary sources — seems to be that the failure thesis fits neatly into the familiar picture of postwar Germans repressing their past, keeping silent about what they

had done, indignantly rejecting the slightest hint of “collective guilt,” and showing no interest in the victims of German policies. Before I summarize what I found in the sources and how I interpreted it, let me advance my own hypothesis, which I cannot prove but find most plausible. I submit that the widespread readiness to find the effects of atrocity film screenings in postwar Germany disappointing is the result of exceedingly high hopes. After so much shameful indifference in the previous years, one wanted to see spontaneous conversions of viewers en masse. Confrontation with an atrocity film was to be a “road to Damascus” that converted as many Sauls as possible into Pauls, even if such radical turnarounds were more the stuff of legends than everyday life or, at least, needed a much longer process of reorientation.

I.

In his feature film Verboten! of 1959, the American director Samuel Fuller created a telling picture of just such an on-the-spot conversion, which can raise our awareness of what in reality did not happen or, at least, could not be detected. As a member of the 1st Infantry Division, Fuller participated in the liberation of a satellite camp of the concentration camp Flossenbürg. His commander forced twenty of the town’s leading citizens to clothe all of the naked corpses found in the camp in shirts and pants commandeered from the townspeople and then to wrap them in white bedsheets and bury them. Fuller’s footage of this can be viewed in the documentary Falkenau, vision de l’impossible of 1988.3 In hindsight, Fuller was certain that the Germans at Falkenau had learned their lesson. In a dramatic sequence of his 1980 autobiographical war movie, The Big Red One, Fuller reenacted his own feelings and those of his comrades during the camp’s liberation. However, his earlier film Verboten! tells an entirely fictitious story. During the capture, with heavy American losses, of a provincial Bavarian town faithful to Nazism to the very end, a young GI, David Brent, falls in love with former “Blitzmädel” Helga Schiller, who dresses his wounds, and soon afterwards marries her despite the fraternization ban. The audience knows more than naive, good-natured David does, namely, that Helga deceived the denazification office about her Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM) career and marries David solely out of materialistic calculation. Nevertheless, Helga appears to turn away from Nazism as her affection for David grows. In any case, she is appalled to find out that her younger brother Franz belongs to a Werewolf gang, whose cynical leader Bruno sends its members out to steal and orders them to lynch...
alleged traitors. Franz defends the gang as working “for Hitler” and refuses to believe his sister when she tells him that Germans were the first to be thrown into concentration camps. Franz aggressively protests that she is lying: only Jews, Poles, and “all the other enemies who started the war” were locked up in camps. So, Helga makes a pact with Franz: if she fails to prove to him that the Hitler regime was criminal, she will join him in his fight against the American occupiers. To present him with irrefutable evidence, she takes Franz to the Nuremberg trial. We see the siblings pass a guard and sit down in benches that — appropriate for the conversion that is supposed to occur — resemble pews.

By including historical courtroom footage of the Nuremberg trial as well as excerpts from various films that were actually shown there, the director has Franz catch sight of Göring and the other defendants, listen to U.S. Chief Prosecutor Robert H. Jackson’s opening statement including his announcement that the Nazis’ “own films” will be shown, and then watch Hitler, marching SA and Hitler Youth, scenes of persecution, miserable camp inmates, a gas chamber, and piles of corpses on the screen. The combination of Jackson’s announcement with this montage of footage of different origins clearly gives Franz — and the viewers of Verboten! — the impression that these pictures of the camps were taken not by the liberating Allies, which actually was the case, but by the Nazis, who had shamelessly documented even their worst crimes on film. In line with Helga’s argument, the narrator of the atrocity film within the film first stresses the German victims of Nazi rule: anti-Nazis, the mentally ill, the handicapped, Protestants, and Catholics. We then watch defiant, unbelieving Franz getting nervous and starting to sweat as his facial expressions become more and more desperate. When the prosecutors’ film quotes Nazi leaders, Franz sees, in his mind’s eye, Bruno making the same brutal statements about enemies that must die and proclaiming hate as the new religion for Werewolf gang members. The narrator of the film within the film continues that probably the greatest crime against humanity is what the Nazis did to the Jews. As children tattooed with numbers, fake shower heads, and heaps of gold teeth appear on the screen, Franz breaks down and turns his face away in despair. Helga grabs his head and admonishes him to look, together with her, at what “the whole world should see.” Franz is crying now. He can barely speak. “I did not know,” he stammers repeatedly. But Franz does not stop at this claim, which was heard so frequently in the immediate postwar period that Margaret Bourke-White sarcastically called it “a kind of national chant for Germany.”
running that very evening to betray the Werewolf gang to David who, as a member of the military government, immediately breaks it up.

This textbook conversion was unrealistic in many respects. First, very few ordinary Germans were granted access as spectators to the Nuremberg proceedings, and there was never a courtroom session that combined Jackson’s opening statement with such a mixture of films, which were actually shown over the course of several weeks. Second, when Germans felt obliged or forced to watch atrocity films, the pressure was not exercised by a trusted loved one but by the Allies, whom many still perceived as the enemy. Third, what went on in viewers’ minds hardly ever showed so unambiguously on their faces nor could it be spotted so clearly by observers as in the close-ups of Franz’s face. And, finally, on top of everything else, Franz gets the opportunity to prove his conversion by giving up his fight against the occupation forces and handing his fanatical former comrades over to the new authorities.

In real life, denazification hardly ever came about so straightforwardly. As a rule, the screenings of atrocity films did not trigger unequivocal signs of inner change. At best, one could inquire whether viewers believed that what they saw in a film was true. The fact that a broad majority regularly answered in the affirmative confirms that Germans had either known of or at least suspected the crimes or, in any case, considered the Nazi regime capable of them. However, the films’ other effects were difficult to assess. If the images were supposed to shame German viewers, then what showed that a viewer did, or did not, feel shame? Shame is a feeling of embarrassment that uncontrollably arises in human beings when they are caught in the — sometimes unintentional — act of violating a norm which they generally (even if not in that moment) share. An individual feels shame bodily, but whether he or she also evinces the visible reactions indicative of shame — blushing, lowering of the head, avoiding looking others in the eye — is less certain and mostly a matter of observers’ interpretations. On the other hand, even an explicit public avowal that one is feeling shame does not necessarily make for more credibility. I would like to demonstrate the problem by introducing the three case studies I undertook in my book.

II.

When the American prosecution at the IMT trial presented their film Nazi Concentration Camps on the eighth day of the proceedings,
commentators focused their attention more on the defendants’ reactions than on the film. There are some hints that suggest that the prosecutors had indeed intended to offer the international journalists crowding the press gallery something that they could turn into good stories. Chief Prosecutor Jackson had successfully established his strategy of basing the prosecution first and foremost on the Nazis’ own documents and relying less on witness accounts, which would have appealed to the public much more. The long-winded readings from dry treaties, laws, and memos had already resulted in the first mocking articles. While hardly anyone doubted that the 21 indicted major war criminals bore significant guilt, all of the defendants had pleaded “not guilty” at the opening of the trial without the slightest indication of an awareness of wrongdoing. To be sure, nobody expected that the screening of an atrocity film would lead any of them to cave in and confess. Rather, most of the correspondents present sought to catch a glimpse of someone in the dock feeling shame at least at the moment when the disgraceful consequences of their deeds were revealed for all the world to see.

In order to allow, theoretically, for such a glimpse during the screening when the lights would be switched off, neon tubes were fixed to the dock’s balustrade the night before. Practically, however, the set-up did not work out. Reading through the reports on the film screening in the international press and the diaries and memoirs of participants in the trial, one finds similar descriptions of defendants’ reactions, but the reactions are ascribed to different individuals. Several commentators claimed to have detected hidden tears — some “detected” them in Walther Funk’s eyes, others in Hans Frank’s, and still others in the eyes of somebody else. Various explanations were offered for why this or that defendant had used his handkerchief. Lowered and raised heads were commented upon; some wanted to know whose hands had trembled and who had clenched his fists or grit his teeth. Only one reaction, an ostentatious gesture, was widely reported and interpreted by most in the same way: ex-Reichsbank president Hjalmar Schacht had turned his back to the screen throughout the hour-long film in order to express that shaming him, whom Hitler had arrested after July 20, 1944 and interned in a concentration camp, was inappropriate.

A detailed analysis of the reports about the effects of the film Nazi Concentration Camps on the defendants thus reveals how wide the room for observers’ interpretation was, the degree to which observers

7 Rebecca West would later coin the famous bon mot of Nuremberg as “a citadel of boredom” in A Train of Powder (New York, 1955), 3. The film about camps liberated by the Western Allies did not fit into the Americans’ presentation of proofs of a “conspiracy” to commit crimes against the peace. The prosecutors interrupted their documentation of the German chain of breaches of international treaties between the annexation of Austria and the destruction of Czechoslovakia.

8 This term from the London Charter went back to the 1943 Moscow Declaration that had announced the intention of the Allied leaders to punish all those Germans whose criminal offenses had no particular geographical localization by joint decision of the Allies, while all other German war criminals would be sent back to the countries where they had committed their crimes so that they could be judged by the people they had outraged.
were influenced by what they hoped for and what they knew about each defendant, and the ways in which authors turned what they observed or guessed into stories with a punchline. In Nuremberg, many apparently hoped that the defendants would be shamed, and most commentators came to the conclusion that the American film had indeed succeeded in this, while a small minority of commentators inferred that the defendants had proven themselves even more unscrupulous and brazen than expected. Presumably, the wish to shame the indicted major war criminals was so widespread because it was thought that no punishment would be severe enough to fit the crimes in question. A telling variation of this theme can be found in the trial’s press coverage when, two and a half months later, the Soviet prosecutors screened their Film Documents of the Atrocities by the German Fascist Aggressors in the USSR in the courtroom. This time, the film fit the presentation of evidence, and commentators focused more on its content than on its effects on the defendants. One East German correspondent, however, who was certain of the defendants’ guilt and shamelessness, claimed to have noticed that they had shown signs of acute fear during the film screening — fear, he speculated, of their certain death sentences. Juridical sentencing alone apparently did not provide enough satisfaction.

III.
The only target group of the Allied atrocity films about whose reactions we have a large number of first-hand records is German prisoners of war. In the summer of 1945, all POWs held in British or American captivity outside of the European continent were forced to view the twenty-minute film KZ. Immediately afterwards, many expressed their feelings in writing while others were questioned by their German camp leaders, who then sent summaries to the Allied commandants. This means that we can almost listen to POWs coming to terms with the overwhelming pictures before others started to interpret viewers’ reactions. German POWs are an especially informative group for other reasons as well. On the one hand, they were heterogeneous in regard to their personal war experiences, the dates of their capture, their knowledge of the further course of the war, and their political views. On the other hand, they all found themselves together in the hands of the (former) enemy, who now ordered them to attend a film screening and guarded, monitored, and questioned them about their responses.
The resulting primary sources have allowed me to reconstruct a surprisingly broad spectrum of responses — surprising, that is, only if one assumes there could be only one reaction to such gruesome images or, rather, two — one right and one wrong — without acknowledging the variation among individuals’ dispositions. When I classify the documented responses and arrange them along a scale, this scale reaches from approval and justification of the crimes through dismissals of the film as “propaganda” and relativizing references to Allied war crimes to articulations of dismay and fury with the Nazis, the SS, Himmler, or Hitler, avowals of shame, discarding Nazi emblems, and, finally, collective burnings of uniforms and commemoration ceremonies for the victims. Responses at the two extremes were rare. Very few POWs seem to have defended the Nazi crimes, and when they did, they appear to have wanted primarily to provoke their captors. Equally, demonstrations of support and empathy for the victims were exceptional, but when they occurred they were usually carried out by groups who sometimes mobilized other groups. The dramatic enactment of one’s break with the Nazi regime by burning one’s uniform is also only infrequently reported; however, this may count as the one unmistakable indicator of radical change.

Since responses are often ambiguous, not much insight is gained by merely classifying them. Take, for example, the frequently articulated reservation that an atrocity film was Allied propaganda, which could be based on quite varied considerations. By “propaganda” a critic could mean that the film was faked altogether, that the dead shown in the film had not died in concentration camps but had been killed in Allied air raids on German cities. A small number of POWs did indeed voice this charge while others wanted at least to cast doubt on the origins of the corpses. Much more frequently, however, those who used the word “propaganda” did not question the atrocity film in principle but reckoned that the filmmakers had exaggerated. (Laughs were reported, in particular, at the film narrator’s claim that there had been 300 Nazi camps and at the mention of lampshades made of human skin.9) Some who made the “propaganda” charge argued that the film showed only the chaos of the last weeks of the war; others complained about onesidedness and the film’s silence in regard to Allied war crimes; yet others meant to suggest nothing more than the undeniable fact that the Allies pursued a policy in showing them the atrocity film, namely, to impress and reeducate the film’s German viewers. It was, of course, true that the Allied footage, inevitably, showed conditions in the very last stage of the camps, most of which

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9 This rumor played a crucial role in the trials against Ilse Koch, the Buchenwald commandant’s wife, whom camp inmates had accused of having owned such a lamp and even having ordered tattooed prisoners whose skin she was interested in killed. Such a lampshade made of human skin, however, was in fact never found.
had not been death camps but had become dumping grounds for the thousands of sick and starving evacuees from camps further east. My impression is that it was exactly this ambiguity of the qualification “propaganda” that made this reservation so attractive for Germans. It helped to keep the nightmarish images at bay without needing to articulate what it was precisely that one doubted.

Expressions of harsh criticism of the Nazis are also open to interpretation. With such criticism, a film viewer could express an anti-fascist conviction, articulate his disillusionment, distance himself from the regime, find an outlet for his distress, or follow a strategy of exonerating himself. In order to assess such expressions correctly and to evaluate to what extent they were triggered by the atrocity film, one would have to know what a POW thought about National Socialism before the film screening. Explicit anti-fascist statements, for example, were probably not effects of the film but the result of long-harbored political sentiments. Especially when POWs used political catchwords or slogans from the socialist or communist parties, we can assume that they had already despised the Nazis before the screening and only took the film to confirm the worst of their expectations. Expressions or signs of personal grief, on the other hand, are much less open to interpretation if they occurred in convinced supporters of Nazism, who had illusions to lose through the film viewing, so that such expressions can be more confidently taken as evidence of the film’s effectiveness. This is something the guards don’t seem to have realized when they voiced their surprise at noticing tears mostly in the cages for those POWs who were labeled “black” meaning “fanatical Nazi.” (“Grey” was the label for apolitical men and “white” was for Nazi opponents.)

POW sources are also especially informative because POWs usually stayed together as a group in the weeks after the screening, which meant that they talked about the film more, and for a longer duration, than all of the films’ other German viewers. A few primary sources offer some insights into these group dynamics. According to such sources, vociferous opinion leaders who talked about the film’s alleged lies and exaggerations could get uncertain comrades on their side during and immediately after a screening. But this does not seem to have lasted very long. As newspapers and radio programs revealed more Nazi crimes in the following weeks, and as some POWs started to speak about their personal experiences with such crimes, be it as perpetrators, bystanders, or former concentration
camp inmates, it became more and more difficult for the die-hards to resist the truth. Therefore, it seems that in many POW camps the atrocity film screenings significantly contributed to a process in which the long predominant Nazis and staunch nationalists lost followers and influence, while antifascists and democrats, many of whom had kept a low profile out of fear of peer punishment (Feme), gained increasing authority.

IV.

After indicted German war criminals and POWs, the third target group of Allied atrocity films was the civilian population in occupied Germany. All four military governments organized screenings in their zones of occupation, but the Americans made by far the greatest efforts to reach large audiences, and they were the only ones who systematically studied audience reception. In this summary of the results of my extended study, I am going to concentrate on the screenings of Die Todesmühlen, probably the best-known atrocity film, in the American zone between January and March 1946. These are the screenings on which the prevalent thesis, mentioned earlier, of the failure of Allied reeducation through atrocity films is usually based. Before I suggest a different reading of the film’s effects, however, another legend needs to be dispelled. Although in later recollections many Germans claimed that the occupiers had compelled them to watch a film on concentration camps, mandatory attendance was actually a rare exception. If atrocity films were shown in their proximity at all (and they were shown in very few places in the other three zones), people could usually decide for themselves whether to see them or not. The widely “recalled” measure of food ration cards being stamped at the box offices had, indeed, been considered by the British and the Americans, but the British never finished their atrocity film, and the Americans, after brief discussion, decided against enforcement measures. Interestingly, however, the thought of Allied compulsion seems to have suggested itself to many Germans in 1946. A small number of local authorities in the American zone announced on their own that attendance would be mandatory in their jurisdictions, but OMGUS immediately canceled such unauthorized directives once they came to its attention. Nevertheless some movie-goers, especially former members of the Nazi Party, brought their ration cards to theaters and insisted on having them stamped as they were convinced that, even if attendance was not mandatory at present, it would be later. Also, many Germans actually demanded that former Nazi party members
be forced to attend a screening (but this never happened). Since very few civilians in postwar Germany actually ever had to watch an atrocity film,\textsuperscript{10} it is telling that so many added the imagined enforcement to their memories. This widespread false recollection shows how common the preference for representing oneself as a victim of the occupiers rather than as an open-minded, repentant movie-goer was; but it also shows that the degree to which postwar Germans took their attendance to be voluntary rested on subjective interpretation.

Although the Americans deliberately abstained from any policy of compulsory attendance they still intended the viewing of \textit{Todesmühlen} to appear as the proper thing to do. They therefore produced the unusually high number of 114 prints of the film and organized the screenings in such a way that all of the reopened movie-theaters in each of the zone’s three military districts showed the atrocity film in the same week so that movie-goers of that district had no alternatives that week. (Only in Berlin’s American sector was the situation different as movie-goers could cross the sector’s border to visit other theaters.) In addition, theater owners were obliged to screen \textit{Todesmühlen} only in combination with the British-American newsreel \textit{Welt im Film} and a serious documentary but under no circumstances with a feature film. In comparison with the feature film programs, which by then had again become usual (and even included German feature films from the Nazi era that had been declared politically harmless), the atrocity film screenings in early 1946 clearly stood out as a reeducation measure. One can well imagine that such an obvious attempt at reeducating residents evoked the idea that attendance was a moral obligation. Several journalists of the licensed German press pointed out that this moral obligation was all the greater precisely because the military government did not order Germans to see the film. Because viewing was voluntary, the turnout at theaters could be interpreted as an indicator of the locals’ readiness to confront their Nazi past. Thus, German journalists pushing for attendance promised, in addition to a personal catharsis, a gain in national reputation if sizable numbers of movie-goers showed up. Also teachers, employers, and other authority figures might well have exerted pressure to attend so that in retrospect many movie-goers would not recall their attendance as voluntary.

As mentioned earlier, the primary sources on audiences’ reception of \textit{Todesmühlen} hardly ever convey viewers’ responses in their own words. Rather, we have documents from social scientists, journalists, and

\textsuperscript{10} In the American zone, these were the residents of those places, where the unauthorized enforcement of attendance could not be called off in time. This is known of Bad Kissingen but might have been the case in one or two other places as well.
other observers who reported, interpreted, and evaluated what they found. Their reports depended, of course, on the specific screenings they attended, the sample of interviewees they polled, their prior expectations of viewers, and the intended audience for their reports. Accounts describing the atmosphere in the movie theater, for example, regularly came to more positive conclusions when American intelligence officers were reporting to their superiors than when German journalists were writing for their fellow countrymen. The American intelligence officers had evidently feared protests and walk-outs and were therefore relieved when neither occurred. Moreover, when some of them, posing as German movie-goers, heckled the film as Allied propaganda, audience members shushed them up or lectured them that the film showed the truth. In light of their experiences in the movie theaters, most intelligence experts therefore interpreted silence at the moment when the film ended as a sign of shame and dismay. German journalists, by contrast, having promised catharsis and looking to witness spontaneous conversions, tended to be disappointed as their disillusioned reporting shows. We can assume, however, that German journalists also intended their supposed quotations of banal or inappropriate comments by Germans leaving the theater as admonishments to their readers to behave differently. Finally, another reason for German journalists’ more negative coverage may have been that they wanted to recommend themselves as demanding reeducators to the military government.

Military intelligence’s main device for opinion research was the anonymous multiple-choice questionnaire, which was handed out at random to viewers at some screenings. Three different surveys of this kind can be found in the archives — not the completed questionnaires themselves but only their analyses. The historical literature has focused on the fact that two of these surveys included a question about whether or not the viewer felt, in the one case collectively, and in the other personally, guilty for the crimes documented in the film. That a significant majority answered the question in the negative in both cases is the basis for most authors’ thesis that Die Todesmühlen failed as an attempt at reeducation. And here the carelessness in the analysis of sources becomes striking. Regardless of how probable it is, psychologically, that immediately after exposure to disturbing images someone would confess guilt for the underlying crimes, I want to argue that the readiness to confess guilt is a badly chosen criterion for assessing the pedagogical success or failure of atrocity films. This point is confirmed by the two surveys in question, which differ in almost every way except for the relatively high percentage of
respondants who denied feelings of guilt. In Eichstätt an American captain found the turnout during Todesmühlen’s seven-day run too small and therefore scheduled extra screenings and demanded that all public employees attend one if they had not yet seen the film. At 14%, the return of completed questionnaires in Eichstätt was very low, and among those who did respond, the number who gave snotty answers or deliberately misunderstood awkwardly phrased questions was high. In Berlin, by contrast, where nobody was officially pressured to attend a screening, participation in the survey was much higher, and 90% of respondents answered that Todesmühlen should be shown to all Germans. In other words, although in both Eichstätt and Berlin large majorities denied feeling personally or collectively guilty for Nazi crimes, those two majorities gave widely divergent responses to all of the other questions. This finding fits the picture of other sources which show that Germans in 1945-46 rejected any suggestion of “collective guilt” even if nobody explicitly reproached them for it. In Eichstätt, where the questionnaire asked about feelings of personal guilt, several respondents noted that there was no such thing as collective guilt. The word “guilt” seems to have triggered a kind of reflex or hypersensitivity — hearing and rejecting an accusation even where none was lodged, and, more specifically, hearing it in its least convincing form, namely as a collective charge, in order to reject it the more soundly. But this means that interviewees’ denial of guilt feelings in post-screening surveys can be explained in terms of social psychology, so that such reponses do not have much to do with the film and hence cannot be used to judge its effectiveness.

Concentrating exclusively on responses to sensitive questions about guilt obscures the diversity in political attitudes that responses to other questions reveal. This diversity led to the same wide spectrum of reactions to the atrocity films in the civilian population as it did with the POWs. The only difference is that the POWs’ collective responses, like burning Nazi insignia or collecting money for the victims of Nazi crimes, did not occur among civilians. This might well be due to the fact that the civilian population gathered more anonymously in the cinemas and could therefore more easily avoid subsequent communication about what they had seen than the POWs confined in their camps.

V.

who were used to dealing with diversity and thus prepared to discover it — and who therefore did not measure success or failure with a single indicator. Those observers and commentators, on the other hand, who essentially pursued moral or political goals with their reports on viewers’ responses tended to polarize matters, focusing solely on what they portrayed as morally right and wrong reactions and quantifying them. Following suit, most historians have paid attention only to the single detail that a majority of surveyed viewers denied feelings of guilt. The failure thesis drawn from this fits so well into the well-known picture of a deficient German Vergangenheitsbewältigung that nobody inquired into the other responses that were collected in 1945-46. But it is only if we look at the whole range of reactions and correlate them with the different conditions of film viewing that we can analyze under which conditions certain reactions became more likely than others. This type of analysis will not answer the question whether the screenings of the atrocity films succeeded or failed, but this question may be wrongly posed in the first place.

In my book, I have recommended leaving aside the heated and somewhat muddled debate on Germans’ guilt and examining the responses to atrocity films in light of the fact that the pictures were shameful and that the Allies used their films to shame Germans. As I have explained earlier, there are no unambiguous indicators of shame. There is, however, a clear indicator of someone’s immunity to shaming: A person who proudly justified the crimes that the films documented was not ashamed of them or at least wanted to demonstrate that he or she could not be shamed. But this hardly ever happened. None of the Nuremberg defendants, not even Göring, boasted about the mass murder in the camps; rather, they denied knowing about it. However unconvincing, such denials suggest that the person considered not only the Nazi crimes shameful but also knowledge of them at the time they occurred. If we look at it this way, we find that nearly all German film viewers in 1945-46 were to some degree receptive to feelings of shame and being shamed. In this respect, the screenings were very effective. Yet, my study also shows that with shame, as necessary and appropriate as this feeling may appear, not much was achieved. People who feel shame usually prefer not to talk about its source or about the process of coming to terms with it. Therefore, the atrocity films were no miracle weapon of instant reeducation. Many more initiatives and discussions had to follow. And, finally, actively and publicly shaming viewers did not increase the films’ effectiveness. On the contrary, shaming offered
viewers the loophole of shifting attention away from their own moral failure to the question of whether the people who tried to shame them had the right to do so. This loophole was used by many Germans. Their reservation that the atrocity films were Allied propaganda because they did not address Allied war crimes served the purpose of undermining the Allies’ moral authority. Whether this strategy was effective at keeping the disturbing pictures at bay remains a private matter on which the historian can shed little light.

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