

*Research Collections in
the Social History of Communications*



Leni Riefenstahl's
Triumph of the Will



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**Leni Riefenstahl's
*Triumph of the Will***

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REEL GUIDE

Introduction

Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) is not only the greatest propaganda film ever made, it is a film for which a sense of informed historical context continues to be a major problem. *Triumph of the Will* recorded the annual Nazi Party Congress at historic Nuremberg in September 1934; the film glorified Adolf Hitler and introduced a list of Nazi leaders to Germans who could be counted on not to have many of the names clearly in mind. The beautiful backdrop of Nuremberg, the wonderful staging of the crowd scenes, and the film's sense of spectacle have made it a visual icon of nazism. So successful was *Triumph of the Will* in promoting the visual image of Hitler that it was never again necessary to have another such film made. Riefenstahl's film simply swept the competition from the field.

Triumph of the Will's brilliant cinematography and superb editing are apparent to any modern viewer, even though most people today view the film in battered 16mm copies or on videotape. The primary argument over the film has to do with its moral aspects and what it says about nazism. For many, it is inconceivable that a film that so effectively promotes nazism cannot thus be held responsible for the Death Camps; many who write about this film simply reject its artistic dimension because of their abhorrence of nazism. Such moral concerns are heightened when one sees a conventional World War II television program in which some brief clip from *Triumph of the Will* is allowed to serve as a visual microcosm for all of nazism; the shots of regimented crowds become visual evidence for the complicity of all Germans in the Final Solution. The fact that such a response is emotional and ahistorical fails to change the minds of many viewers.

A major problem in understanding the historical context of this film is the continuing evasions and half-truths told to interviewers by Leni Riefenstahl herself. These evasions have clearly seemed persuasive to credulous English-speaking interviewers, and archival materials in Germany or Washington, D.C., have not provided enough documentation to thoroughly discredit Riefenstahl's version of what happened. The destruction of virtually all of Goebbel's Propaganda Ministry files during World War II

means that a major source of documentation simply does not exist. As of this writing Riefenstahl continues to revise her memoirs in Munich, but one cannot presume that these memoirs will provide a candid accounting of the circumstances that led to the making of *Triumph of the Will*.

For English-speaking students, a helpful place to begin is Richard Meran Barsam's *Filmguide to Triumph of the Will* (1975), which provides literal translations of the speeches made by Hitler and other Nazi leaders in the film. However, Mr. Barsam is not particularly helpful when it comes to the actual circumstances surrounding the making of the film, for he relies on the self-serving interviews Riefenstahl gave to some English and American film buffs in the 1960s. Nor will one learn much from Glenn B. Infield's *Leni Riefenstahl: The Fallen Film Goddess* (1976), though it does contain documents more useful than one might guess from the dustjacket: "the intimate and shocking story of Adolf Hitler and Leni Riefenstahl." Renata Berg-Pan's *Leni Riefenstahl* (1980) does not add to our understanding of the making of *Triumph of the Will*, but does provide information about the other films in which Riefenstahl established herself as a beautiful screen presence in the 1920s. David Welch's *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945* (1983) contains a chapter about *Triumph of the Will*, but does not say much about the film's context. Cooper C. Graham's *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (1986) includes a good bit of information, often self-serving, about *Triumph des Willens*.

The re-appearance of *Sieg des Glaubens*, the Riefenstahl film about the 1933 party rally in Nuremberg, after so many years, provides important new visual evidence for why *Triumph des Willens* is such effective propaganda. See Martin Loiperdinger and David Culbert, "Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi Ideology: The SA, *Sieg des Glaubens*, and *Triumph des Willens*," to appear in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (February 1988).

Those who read German will want to look at the *Memoiren* (1987) of Riefenstahl, written with the assistance of Will Tremper and scheduled for translation into English by Carl Offermann. Of considerable value is Martin Loiperdinger, *Triumph des Willens': Rituale der Mobilmachung; Der Parteitagfilm von Leni Riefenstahl* (1987). Two other publications in German are of interest: Loiperdinger's *Triumph des Willens': Einstellungsprotokoll* (1980), a detailed discussion of the visual contents of the film; and Peter Nowotny's *Leni Riefenstahl's 'Triumph des Willens': Zur Kritik Dokumentarischer Filmarbeit im NS-Faschismus* (1981).

The documents itemized in the Reel Index of this guide will provide students of film and propaganda with an immense amount of material concerning the making of *Triumph of the Will*, but few definitive answers to some of the questions about the film that have interested all serious students of the subject for some time. These materials clearly indicate the

error of relying too heavily on Riefenstahl's own self-serving interviews regarding the film. In general, the documents provide more questions than answers, as is so often the case.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to conclude with some thoughts about what we know concerning the impact of *Triumph of the Will*. Riefenstahl has suggested that the film was too artistic for most German audiences and that it had but little distribution. In fact, the film was shown all over Germany, particularly by means of mandatory screenings in schools and local halls. The film's success involved the support of all the major newsreel companies in Germany, whose cameramen had been covering the Nuremberg rallies for years. Certainly the editing skills so apparent in *Triumph of the Will* cannot be understood without the knowledge that *Victory of Faith*, the film of the 1933 Nuremberg Rally, was hardly the minor film that Riefenstahl has described in interviews. The earlier film was a major production, edited with the help of Walter Ruttmann, and shown in every theater in Germany. Ruttmann's role in editing *Triumph of the Will* is unclear, but his genius in the area of film montage is a matter of record; it is much more plausible that he worked on editing *Triumph of the Will* than the presumption that a beautiful actress suddenly took up the complicated art of montage and achieved such extraordinary results. Would it not be ironic if, in this instance, the old story of the man taking full credit for the behind-the-scenes labor of a woman were reversed? Walter Ruttmann died of cancer in 1941, and conclusive evidence concerning his role in the editing of *Triumph of the Will* has not surfaced. The documents in this microfilm collection will stimulate further work.

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REEL INDEX

The four-digit number on the left indicates the frame number at which each item begins. An annotated description of each item is provided by the editor.

Reel 1

Frame

- 0001 Item 1 is a heretofore unpublished photograph of *Triumph of the Will's* opening at the UFA Palast am Zoo theater in Berlin in March 1935. The elaborate decorations suggest the significance of the film to the Nazi Party. 1p.
- 0002 Item 2 is a transcript of a detailed interrogation of Riefenstahl by American army officers on May 30, 1945. This report was used in Riefenstahl's denazification trial after the war. 4pp.
- 0006 Item 3 is a complete copy of Riefenstahl's *Hinter den Kulissen des Reichsparteitagsfilms* (Munich, 1935), a collection of photographs with a small amount of text concerning the making of the film. Riefenstahl has claimed that a journalist actually produced this booklet, and one should not consider this piece of publicity to be conclusive evidence that the film was made by Riefenstahl as ardent Nazi enthusiast. (After 1945, Riefenstahl, of course, tried hard to distance herself from such a pro-Nazi film.) The photographs contain important visual evidence concerning the manner in which some of the best shots in the film were arranged. 62pp.
- 0068 Item 4 contains correspondence between Riefenstahl and David Culbert, including a signed release form granting permission to quote from a long interview of Riefenstahl by Culbert in September 1979; a typescript of the interview itself as conducted in German; and an English translation of many of the main points of the interview. This interview focuses on the editing of the film, over which there has been much discussion; it, too, should be read with a critical eye. 67pp.
- 0135 Item 5 consists of a typescript, in German, of a January 3, 1979 telephone interview that David Culbert conducted with Albert Speer, who had a good bit to do with the physical arrangement of the Party Rally in Nuremberg. 7pp.

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- 0142 Item 6 includes a detailed current map of Nuremberg, as well as a number of photographs taken in Nuremberg in 1980, of many of the places associated with the film. 12pp.
- 0154 Item 7 is the complete Riefenstahl File from the Berlin Document Center. These documents were assembled in 1945 for the purpose of prosecuting Germans alleged to have been ardent Nazis. The file contains various kinds of documents, such as copies of telegrams Riefenstahl sent to Hitler extolling his virtues, as well as forms that Riefenstahl had to fill out asserting that she had no Jewish ancestors. The documents support her insistence that technically she never joined the Nazi Party (which is why she was not sent to prison in 1945-1946), but do not provide much information about the making of *Triumph of the Will*. As Riefenstahl has always successfully insisted, her telegrams praising Hitler constituted obligatory and fulsome praise, and nothing more. This file is of great interest to historians, even though there is contained in it no smoking gun regarding Riefenstahl's complicity with the Nazis. 227pp.
- 0381 Item 8 consists of the briefer, complete name files from the Berlin Document Center for Walter Ruttmann, Walter Frentz, and Arnold Raether, plus additional documents and letters given to David Culbert by Hans Barkhausen. Frentz was a leading cameraman for *Triumph of the Will*; Ruttmann the genius who made and edited *Berlin: Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (1927) and an experienced student of montage who worked on the opening sequences of *Triumph of the Will*. Arnold Raether was involved with Nazi filmmaking; and Barkhausen was employed in the Nazi film archive in Berlin as an archivist. Barkhausen and Culbert are inclined to believe that the brilliance of the editing of *Triumph of the Will* is attributable to Ruttmann, not just to Riefenstahl; however, these documents do not conclusively disprove Riefenstahl's claim that she alone edited the entire film. 43pp.
- 0424 Item 9 consists of documents of immense value to those interested in *Triumph of the Will*--documents relating to Riefenstahl's lost feature-length film about the 1933 Party Rally in Nuremberg, *Sieg des Glaubens* (*Victory of Faith*). (All prints of this film were ordered destroyed by Hitler in 1934 because of the fact that Ernst Rohm--the SA leader ordered killed by Hitler in 1934--appeared in many of the scenes.) The documents contradict Riefenstahl's efforts to make light of her 1933 film. Walter Ruttmann also helped edit this 1933 film and could well have taught Riefenstahl much of what she needed to know about editing. 34pp.
- 0458 Item 10 contains typed *Protokolls* from the *Bundesarchiv* in Koblenz, West Germany, relating to the making of *Triumph of the Will*, *Victory of Faith*, and *Olympia*, Riefenstahl's brilliant film about the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. These official minutes are accurate, careful guides to the manner in

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which the official bureaucracy of Nazi-controlled film production dealt with Riefenstahl, who was technically in control of her own film company and not a member of a film unit created by Goebbels or the Nazi Party itself. The official minutes are quite clear about matters relating to the making of *Olympia*, including costs, less so about matters relating to the other two films. These minutes will suggest to any serious student the extremely cozy relationship between Riefenstahl and Nazi Party film production. 73pp.

- 0531 Item 11 also comes from the *Bundesarchiv*. These *Pressedienst* documents, prepared by the Nazi bureaucracy, contain stories sent to German newspapers as well as directions concerning the manner in which the stories were to be covered. The historian cannot presume that such stories, full of breathless enthusiasm about the making of *Triumph of the Will*, accurately reflect the daily thoughts of Riefenstahl; however, in them can be found information about such matters as Walter Ruttmann's role in the editing of the film. These daily reports make clear the collaborative nature of this film and contradict Riefenstahl's claim that the artistic success of the film was due solely to her own efforts. 20pp.
- 0551 Item 12 contains some documents from the film vaults in Festung Ehrenbreitstein, the castle in Koblenz where nitrate archival film is stored. These documents concern *Olympia*, as well as German newsreel footage shot at Nuremberg in 1933 and 1934. 55pp.
- 0606 Item 13 includes articles and bibliographies in English relating to Riefenstahl and German cinema from 1946 through 1978. Particularly useful is Richard Alan Nelson's three-part bibliography, as well as the lengthy interviews in English with Riefenstahl that have misled many film scholars. 214pp.
- 0820 Item 14 contains two articles in German by Hans Barkhausen relating to Nazi film production and the Nazi film archive in Berlin. 27pp.
- 0847 Item 15 consists of selected photographs from two souvenir volumes commemorating the Nuremberg Party Rallies of 1933 and 1935. Careful examination will provide information about the exact manner in which some of the shots in *Triumph* were arranged. 26pp.
- 0873 Item 16 consists of three booklets published by the Institute for Scientific Film (IWF) in Göttingen, West Germany, relating to newsreel coverage of the Nazi Party Rallies in Nuremberg in 1927, 1929, and 1934. These careful guides remind the reader that the camera had long been part of these annual affairs. Those arranging the rallies and those planning camera angles literally had years and years in which to perfect their techniques. 76pp.
- 0949 Item 17 is the typescript for a publication from the IWF in Göttingen relating to the making of *Triumph of the Will*. 64pp.

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- 1013 Item 18 is the typescript for a paper by Karsten Fledelius of Copenhagen concerning the historical context of *Triumph of the Will*. 43pp.
- 1056 Item 19 includes two recent (yet rare) volumes by Martin Loiperdinger (1980) and Peter Nowotny (1981) concerning the making of *Triumph of the Will*. 217pp.

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Information Control and Propaganda: Records of the Office of War Information.

Part I: The Director's Central Files, 1945-1945.

Part II: Office of Policy Coordination.

*Series A: Propaganda and Policy Directives
for Overseas Programs, 1942-1945.*

"Triumph of the Will": A Documentary History.

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