

Parliamentary Debate about the Documentary *Night and Fog* (1956)

Abstract

West Germany's request to have the documentary *Night and Fog* withdrawn from competition in Cannes caused conflict and furor not only internationally, but in Germany itself. This debate in the Bundestag, the German Federal Parliament, shows the sharp split between politicians who believed that the film would cause problems in Germany's international relationships, and those who believed that the film was a necessary part of Germany confronting its past, and thought that the removal of the film from Cannes equated to Germany staying silent about its past. In July 1956, the West German government announced that it would provide funding for the text of the film to be translated into German. Paul Celan, a Jewish poet born in Romania who had been a prisoner in a forced labor camp during the war, was chosen to translate the text. Celan's translation lent a Jewish perspective into the film, which in its French iteration had been criticized for failing to address the persecution of the Jews. Jean Cayrol, who wrote the original text of the film, was Catholic and had been persecuted for political reasons; critics argued that Cayrol's treatment of the Holocaust was one of universal genocide, instead of a genocide aimed specifically at the Jewish people. Celan's text serves as a condemnation of racial hatred and a warning that such hatred could surface again at any time.

Source

2nd German Bundestag — 140th Session, Bonn, Wednesday, April 18, 1956

Vice President Dr. Jaeger: I invoke question 26 by Rep. Renger concerning the removal of the French documentary film *Night and Fog*:

Is it correct that the federal government, via the German ambassador in Paris, took steps before the organizing committee of the Cannes Film Festival concerning the removal of the French documentary film *Night and Fog*, which denounces the National Socialist crimes in the concentration camps?
What moved the federal government to make this intervention?

The Foreign Office cannot attend [the session] and is represented by State Secretary Ritter von Lex of the Federal Interior Ministry.

Ritter von Lex, state secretary at the Federal Interior Ministry: The facts of the case described in the first part of the question are accurate. The federal government became convinced that screening the French film *Night and Fog* would contradict the statutes and purpose of the Cannes Film Festival. As much as the federal government shares the film's authors' horror at the National Socialist crimes in the concentration camps, it nevertheless does not believe that international film festivals, which are supposed to be dedicated to cooperation between nations, are the proper place to show a film, — —

(Rep. Dr. Menzel: To show the truth!)

— No!

(Rep. Dr. Schmid [Frankfurt]: Mr. State Secretary, silencing is not the way to promote cooperation!)

Vice President Dr. Jaeger: This is question time. The state secretary is responding to a question posed

by Rep. Renger. Mrs. Renger has the opportunity to pose a follow-up question.

Ritter von Lex, state secretary at the Federal Interior Ministry: I repeat: the federal government does not believe that an international film festival, which is supposed to be dedicated to cooperation between nations, is the proper forum to show a film that can all too easily contribute to reviving the hatred of the German people as a whole that was created by National Socialist crimes.

(Rep. Dr. Arndt: What nonsense! It is incredible to say something like that!)

Vice President Dr. Jaeger: Rep. Renger has the floor for a follow-up question.

Mrs. Renger (SPD): Mr. State Secretary, this objection came not from film officials in Cannes itself, but this time as well from the federal government. Last year it was a concentration camp film, a Norwegian-Yugoslav co-production. Don't you think that this might create the impression that the federal government is unnecessarily associating itself with something it would rather not? Don't you think that other, more suitable steps might be taken than preventing the screening of such a film to protect the German people and save them from the impression of being misunderstood, as if they wished to defend such things? Does this not also rob us of the possibility of having films in our own national and international interest screened in Cannes?

Ritter von Lex, state secretary at the Federal Interior Ministry: Madame Representative, we surely agree that what happened during the so-called Third Reich must be met with the utmost revulsion.

(Rep. Dr. Arndt: You see! — Rep. Dr. Menzel: And must not be forgotten!)

We are, however, of the opinion, that the purpose of the international film festival in Cannes is really not to — —

(Rep. Wehner: They should show the 'German miracle' and not the reverse of the medal! — Shout from the SPD: More like 'German schmaltz'! — Further shouts from the SPD.)

Vice President Dr. Jaeger: I ask you to allow the state secretary to complete his remarks.

Ritter von Lex, state secretary at the Federal Interior Ministry: I have finished my response.

Vice President Dr. Jaeger: A second follow-up question!

Mrs. Renger (SPD): I ask the state secretary whether the federal government is not of the opinion that by screening just such films it distances itself from the crimes of Nazism and shows that the German people does not identify with it, thereby taking a step towards mutual understanding?

(Applause from the SPD.)

Ritter von Lex, state secretary at the Federal Interior Ministry: I think we all agree that we have to distance ourselves from what happened.

(Rep. Dr. Andt: Then do it! Don't keep silent about it!)

But allow me to repeat: the federal government is of the opinion that the international film festival is not the place to conduct this debate.

(Applause from the CDU/CSU. — Rep. Arndt: A bad opinion! — Rep. Dr. Schmid [Frankfurt]: That surprises me! — More shouts from the SPD.)

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