

Film Review

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Review of *Reckonings – The First Reparations*, dir. Roberta Grossman, Katahdin Productions and Go2Films in Association with the Claims Conference/BMF Present, 2022

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What happened after the Holocaust? How were Jewish survivors able to rebuild their lives? Who advocated on their behalf? How did the newly created Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) confront Nazi Germany's past? What are the responsibilities toward survivors of a genocide? These are some questions at the heart of the 2022 documentary film, *Reckonings – The First Reparations*. This film, 1 h and 15 min long, directed by the renowned filmmaker Roberta Grossman, was produced in association with the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference) and the German Federal Ministry of Finance (BMF). As a historian at the Claims Conference, I, together with my historian colleague at the organization, Dr. Ovidiu Creanga, contributed research to this project. Therefore, this review will introduce the film and its relevance for discussions about reparations and compensation to Jewish survivors after the Holocaust.

The year 2022 marked 70 years since the historic negotiations between West Germany and the Claims Conference, and between West Germany and the State of Israel that culminated in the groundbreaking Luxembourg Agreements in September 1952. These agreements, signed among entities that had not existed during the Second World War and the Holocaust, ensured a measure of justice for Jewish Holocaust survivors around the world. *Reckonings* is about commemorating this unprecedented undertaking and explaining the emergence, challenges, consequences, and significance of the negotiations. To do that, the film weaves in

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perspectives of survivors, witnesses, professionals, historians, politicians, as well as state and NGO leaders.

Reckonings explores the aftermath of the Holocaust. Survivors needed food, clothes, medical assistance, housing, but also education and work. About 250,000 languished in displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy, unable or unwilling to return to their former homes, hometowns, and home countries. They endured horrific physical and psychological suffering, their loved ones were murdered, their communities destroyed, their homes taken over by neighbors, and their property confiscated. They were in dire need of reconstituting their lives. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint, JDC) led the way in bringing wide-ranging help. But whence would the money come to further the assistance? How would the survivors be supported once they left the DP camps? Who and why had a responsibility toward these survivors?

In September 1951, the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer made a powerful speech to his parliament, saying: “In the name of the German people, unspeakable crimes have been committed calling for moral and material compensation (...).” This statement opened an opportunity for Jewish leaders to come together to advance a common goal – justice for the survivors in the form of reparations and compensation. A month after Adenauer’s speech, representatives of 23 major Jewish organizations met in New York City under the leadership of Nahum Goldmann, an eminent Jewish statesman, to form the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, in short – the Claims Conference. This organization would negotiate with representatives of the German government for compensation for Jewish survivors outside Israel. Thus, *Reckonings* explores the history of the still little understood Jewish organization that has continued to engage in talks with the German Federal Ministry of Finance to expand the eligibility criteria for compensation and ensure that Holocaust memory, and research, education and documentation on the Holocaust are prioritized as part of reckoning with the past.

Atonement for atrocities, as well as the responsibility to address the wrongs committed, moving forward, and discussions over “blood money” were problematic notions for survivors, Jewish leaders, the Israeli public, German civilians, and German dignitaries. In 1952, only 11 % of Germans supported compensation talks. Many in Israel believed that Jews would endure a humiliating process during the negotiations with German state representatives. Survivors feared the optics knowing that nothing would compensate for the losses they sustained. However, the realities of postwar life and absorption of Holocaust survivors outweighed these dilemmas. By 1951, Israel was on the brink of a collapse after fighting the War of Independence and accepting an unprecedented number (about 600,000) of immigrants, half of whom were Holocaust survivors. The nascent state needed

funds to support the newcomers. Germany, on the other hand, strove to enter the democratic order and restore the good name of the country. Not without importance was Adenauer's own understanding of Catholic tenets for building bridges. *Reckonings* examines the emotional toll the negotiations exerted and presents the human side of the legal deliberations.

The film uses a range of techniques to convey this complex history. In addition to the traditional material used in documentary films, such as archival documents and footage, newspaper clippings, photographs, audio recordings, and interviews, certain scenes are reenacted by actors based on a close reading of primary sources. This way, the viewer can not only see, but also feel the tension in the meeting room. One member of the Claims Conference's delegation, Saul Kagan, asserted that he felt the souls of the six million Jews in the room, so great was the feeling of responsibility. By highlighting the key individuals involved in the negotiations, *Reckonings* pays tribute to their efforts to ensure the importance of the law, humanity, responsibility, history, memory, and justice. In so doing, the film discusses the choreography of the meetings, the personal connections that paved the way to the agreements, and the larger politics that the delegates had to reckon with.

What was the outcome of the negotiations? Israel demanded \$1 billion based on the absorption of 500,000 Holocaust survivors – it received \$750 million in installments in German commodities and services. The Claims Conference demanded a lump sum of \$500 million – it received \$107 million for the rehabilitation and resettlement of survivors and the German government enacted Article II of the agreement that introduced compensation for specific categories of survivors. The Luxembourg Agreements were compromises. They were imperfect, yet their importance is undeniable. They were unprecedented because for the first time in history a country paid reparations to those on whom it inflicted suffering. The basis for the claims was personal suffering and the value of unclaimed property. Survivors explained the money negotiated for compensation allowed them to receive education and counseling and served as a springboard to reestablish their lives. On the other hand, survivors remarked about the difficulties of applying for and receiving the compensation, especially by those who were hesitant, or opposed to being examined by German physicians to prove their suffering.

Reckonings engages, too, with the legacy of the negotiations. In Germany, they are part of *Wiedergutmachung*, meaning “to make whole again.” For the Claims Conference, which has continued to negotiate annually for various liberalizations and expansions of compensation programs, these are negotiations over history, as Gideon Taylor, the organization's President explained. Most importantly, the negotiations and the compensation make a statement that the survivors have not been forgotten.

Reckonings is the first film to examine material reparations for Jewish Holocaust survivors, illuminating the historical complexities, the various perspectives, and consequences of these historic endeavors. The film is addressed to anyone with an interest in the aftermath of the Holocaust and justice after genocide. Accessibly made, the film provides an avenue for educators to teach this history with the support of seven lessons plans, and educational materials that accompany the film (<https://reckoningsfilm.org/educational-materials/>).