Mike Rossiter and Toni Strasburg, dirs. Nazis and the Russian Bomb (a Debonair Production for Channel Four in association with WGBH-Boston for Nova; distributed by Films for the Humanities and Sciences, Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053). Color. English. 60 minutes. VHS videocassette. $89.95 purchase only.

This reviewer was among a group of historians who some time ago made a few films for the teaching of history. Some of these films were, in their time, well-received, and some are still distributed. Each of them has been discussed and considered at a number of history conferences over the last twenty years (most recently at the meeting of the International Association for Media and History in Amsterdam in 1993). So their usefulness as contributions to history education has been much debated. This reviewer views any film proposed for inclusion in the history curriculum in light of those discussions and after setting down and reading countless printed words on educational film construction and expression on historical subjects (including his own effort to construct a theoretical approach to this important subject, published some years ago in the Journal of Contemporary History).

Obviously all of this discussion among film makers, historians and history educators has gone right past WGBH/Nova/Debonair/Channel Four's filmmakers. What WGBH's Nova series film Nazis and the Russian Bomb (surely they mean 'Soviet') dramatically tells us is that the Soviets brought some German scientists into the Soviet Union after the war and forced them to work on their atomic bomb project and on Soviet rocketry. Some history (it may indeed be history) of the Soviet bomb project is told. The conclusion the makers allow one of the Germans interviewed to arrive at for them is that the Soviets would have developed the bomb a few years after its date of actual completion, even had the Germans not contributed their originally advanced scientific knowledge. By the way (and this reviewer finds it odd), only one of the atomic spies who contributed to the development of the Soviet bomb receives any notice in this film.

But the film is not about the bomb alone, as the title implies; at least one-fourth of it is devoted to the rocket scientists and their work. Nor is it necessarily about Nazis, for the filmmakers do not trouble to establish that any of the kidnapped Germans taken to the Soviet Union for this work were indeed members of the Nazi party. At one point, though, the narrator intones that these were "scientists whose careers had already been shaped by the rise of Adolf Hitler." This historian deems it likely that a delay of several years in Soviet production of the bomb—which the makers allow the German witness to imply might have occurred without him and his conferees—might have greatly affected the aging Stalin’s confidence and consequent military and political adventurousness. Without his expectations from the Soviet production of the bomb, Stalin's sometimes bold Cold War confrontational stance might have been altered to a major extent, thereby changing the history of modern times considerably. Certainly Stalin's possession of the bomb contributed much to a worldwide
increase in human fear, most certainly intensifying Cold War tensions and shaping responses in the West, as contemporary journalism on the Soviet bomb and histories of the times suggest. Actually, the Soviet bomb need only have been delayed three and a half years to have appeared after "humanity's greatest genius" had expired. This may be only an historian's pluperfect reflection, but it is the kind of reflection that teachers and students of history should not ignore.

The makers of this film take about an hour to make their point, by a number of means. These include dramatic reenactment, even more dramatic musical accompaniment, eyewitness anecdotal testimony, a number of odd judgments (in 1933, Germany "under Hitler was becoming the dominant power [in central Europe]" (more dominant than the other central European powers, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Lichtenstein, one supposes) and some facts (none checked by this writer, but occasionally incorrect details and implicit anachronisms suggest the need to do so).

The regular use of unsuitable documentary footage as pictorial overlays to narrative and recollection is also a convention of this film. As examples, shots from German newsreels of Stukas at war accompany a narration on wartime scientific developments in Berlin; Stalin and company walk across a Kremlin (?) courtyard as the narrator tells how the project leadership was in the hands of Marshal Beria; a shot of the Brandenburg Gate with quadriga covers a scientist's return to Germany, when at the time the famous quadriga was missing from its historical place. Through these means, we are finally led along the longest of paths to the conclusion noted above.

It appears certain that WGBH and its chosen producers have never given serious thought to the teaching film and its format, and perhaps not more than two thoughts to historical accuracy. They evidently had a time slot to fill, agreed upon a subject, then thought to introduce wherever possible "politically correct" topics. (A woman scientist is shown and mentioned, but she emigrated from Germany before the war and therefore never worked on the Soviet bomb or on Soviet rocketry). They diverge at some length into recollections of Kristallnacht. They ramble on about interesting details of the exiles' daily life in the Soviet Union and tell some good stories about the problems of bomb production in those Soviet circumstances. The product: a lecture of sometimes questionable historical value, with pictures often suited to other purposes.

Such performances suggest that WGBH cannot be trusted as a producing agency for history or the history of science, however they may have misled some of their sincere founders. For what dedicated production agency concerned for either field would hire a producer with such evident lack of concern for historical subject matter and its presentation?

Historians have written on, discussed and debated such production issues for more than twenty years. Many historians in this country and abroad have themselves by now produced decent films. The American Historical Association even offers a worthwhile set of materials that consider relevant issues of production, historical verisimilitude and representation. Alas, all for naught—at least insofar as WGBH is concerned.