

The Holocaust was the massacre of more than 6 million Jews, and another 5 million Russians, Poles, Roma, and other minorities regarded by the German Nazi party as racially inferior. It is widely considered the most horrific act of brutality in the history of the world. Interestingly enough, it has become embedded in American culture, owing perhaps a large portion of its fame to its portrayal in American film.

I chose this project because I wanted to know more about the many films connected to the Holocaust, and to have a chance to see some of the more prominent examples.

Using what I learned, I will explain some recurring themes in these films, explain one of the important moral questions involving the portrayal of the event, and I will talk about the films themselves.

The accurate portrayal of the Holocaust in American films is the most important issue. Since films about the Holocaust are well-known and watched by many people, maintaining historical accuracy is particularly important.

People often bring up moral issues pertaining to the portrayal. These people are divided into two camps. On one hand, there are those who feel that, through the portrayal of events on film, the Holocaust has actually been trivialized. Then, there are those who feel that the Holocaust must be portrayed, despite the dangers of generalization and trivialization.

One of the most well-known advocates of the former argument is the famous Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. He has declared many times that he is disgusted to see [quote] “the final moments of the victims re-enacted with special effects” [end quote] and believes that the Holocaust is truly impossible to portray. That is because it was so indescribably evil, and trying to portray the suffering only helps to trivialize it.

Supporters of the second argument, I for one, recognize the portrayal as part of learning about the Holocaust. Although it is impossible to completely portray the events, what we have now is extremely accurate, perhaps the best we can achieve. The portrayal may trivialize the Holocaust to the extent that every gruesome detail is not shown, but I think it is necessary to portray it if people are to learn all they can about this terrible event.

In the next section, I will provide a brief history of Holocaust films and describe some of the more influential and well-known examples.

*The Great Dictator*, released in 1940, was maybe the first movie directly referencing Jews and internment in the camps. This movie, surprisingly enough, was directed and financed by Charlie Chaplin, who was not Jewish.

Few films mentioned the treatment of Jews just before the War, and few portrayed Nazis as evil. Those that did refer to Nazi racism, didn't actually mention Jews, but usually phrases like "non-gentiles" instead. This was caused mostly because of fear on the part of Hollywood studio heads; they did not want to offend German audiences or be blamed for sending America into war. I will talk about *The Great Dictator* in more detail in the next section.

After Pearl Harbor, Hollywood was encouraged by the U.S. Government to make anti-Nazi war films. After World War II ended, graphic footage of the Holocaust came to the States, and people were very interested in watching this material in news reels. This stopped after only 6 months, presumably because Americans were interested more in rebuilding America's relationship with Germany and helping Germany to rebuild after the war rather than criticizing past policies.

A mainstream Holocaust film was not seen until 1954. This was *The Diary of Anne Frank*, based on Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. The movie was a fictionalized record of her life and was one of the first successful Holocaust films.

Several other films appeared during the 1960s, among them classics like *Judgment at Nuremberg*, about the trial of Nazi war criminals, and *The Pawnbroker*, which dealt with the psychological effects of the war on a concentration camp survivor. However, the next major turning point was not in film, but in television. The 1978 television series *Holocaust* revitalized interest in the Holocaust and was immensely successful. When broadcast in Germany, it became one of the most influential television productions in history. One-third of the German people watched the series, and the broadcast prompted the German government to cancel the statute of limitations on Nazi war crimes. It was influential enough to start its own cynical joke: “The Holocaust miniseries had a bigger impact than the original.”

After the Holocaust miniseries, other Holocaust films sprang up, including *War and Remembrance*, which was another television miniseries, and *Sophie's Choice* in 1982. Recent additions to the list are *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist*. *Schindler's List* helped renew interest in the Nazi's greatest acts of brutality. I will talk about it more in the next section.

I am now going to focus on three films in particular, from three different time periods – before America entered the war, after the war, and present day.

*The Great Dictator*, as mentioned earlier, was written, directed, and produced by Charlie Chaplin in 1940. It is a comedic story about a Jewish barber (played by Chaplin) who fought for a fictional equivalent to Germany, called Tomania, during the First World War. He is affected by amnesia after the war and returns from the hospital to find that the Dictator Hynkel (also played by Chaplin) is now leading Tomania. The movie ends with the barber, having escaped from a prison camp and being mistaken for the dictator, delivering a speech denouncing racism and Nazism.

Like many other movies about the Holocaust that came after, it featured a gentile Savior – the barber’s old war buddy who is compelled to quit his high ranking position and join the barber and his friends in the ghetto.

None of the major film studios in Hollywood, even though they were owned by Jews, released the film for reasons stated earlier. This movie was remarkable for its time, because it was directed by a gentile and released before any other significant strikes at Nazi Germany. It was made before America knew of the full scale of Nazi anti-semitism, and even more strikingly, it was a comedy.

Perhaps most noteworthy was that Chaplin was the only person, Jew or Gentile, who was bold enough to make a movie exclusively about Jews and their treatment under Nazis.

*Judgment at Nuremberg*, directed by Stanley Kramer in 1961, is a film about the trial of several Nazi judges and doctors, who are being accused of wrongly authorizing sterilization and death penalties to Jews and others who did not deserve them. It featured a star-studded cast, including Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Verner Klemperer, and even William Shatner. *Judgement at Nuremberg* is a moving and intellectual piece, and although it receives less attention than it deserves, it ranks among the greatest Holocaust films.

Some of the film’s more notable scenes include the clever defense attorney’s arguments. He implies that if it was the Nazi judges’ fault, it was also the whole world’s fault for standing idle while the Holocaust took place. The defense attorney points out that the sterilization of the mentally challenged was advocated by an American judge.

Other key moments in the film are the questioning of victims, such as a non-Jewish woman who had been allegedly having a romantic relationship with a Jewish man.

In fact, when the Nazi's defense attorney badgers her to tears, the lead Nazi defendant, Ernst Janning, is compelled to speak. He tells how he and the rest of Germany allowed the Holocaust to turn from a propaganda tool to a complete genocide.

Janning, played by Burt Lancaster, pleads guilty, stating that the German public claimed they knew nothing because they didn't want to remember; that they all knew what was happening, but they believed that it was for the good of Germany. This is met with a yell of "Traitor!" from one of the other defendants, and suggests that even within the Nazi regime's legal system, some followed reluctantly.

The most revolutionary part of the movie was the use of footage taken by military photographers of the camps; some of the gruesome images included corpses burnt in furnaces and corpses being pushed by a bulldozer into a ditch.

The 1993 film *Schindler's List*, directed by Steven Spielberg, is a film about a German businessman named Oskar Schindler. While employing Polish Jews as slave labor in his Krakow factory, he witnesses the atrocities of the Nazi police when the Jews are deported.

He then has several Jews taken out of the camp to work in his factory, and after watching the brutality they live through, he purchases a large number of the people who used to work for him to come to his arms factory, where he purposely manufactures defective weapons. His actions effectively protect many Jews from going to, and being killed at, the Auschwitz death camp.

*Schindler's List* is one of the most well known Holocaust films, and a classic of the genre. It has also been fairly controversial. The amount of graphic murder and scenes of the victims' nudity while being gassed, among other aspects, caused some scenes to be followed by a small amount of public outrage. However, the explicitness also strengthens the film's portrayal of torture and the survivors' eventual freedom. The film

is shot almost entirely in black and white, despite being made in the 1990s. This was, as the director describes, to make the film seem gritty and the scenario unpleasant.

It's important to recognize that when talking about films, we can't simply talk about regular Hollywood films with fictional or dramatized plots. Documentaries can be longer than most films and are not bound by storytelling, only by a concern to accurately depict their subject; they are in several ways better than fictional stories. However, they are not as widely seen or acknowledged as story films, and thus are less useful for informing the masses. So, there is a trade-off.

In addition to films, the Holocaust has been an important presence in modern culture. There are hundreds of books about it, such as *The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen, and *Night* by Elie Wiesel. References to the Holocaust can be seen in politicians' speeches, and other genocides, such as the Darfur conflict, are often compared to it. Perhaps as a result of such widespread media portrayals, the Jewish experience as depicted has become less and less a Jewish event, and more of an event the world can relate to. This is the issue of generalization that people like Elie Wiesel address when talking about movies; the audience needs to understand the Jews' problems are like their own for a full effect, and the result is a version which has been "Americanized" and generalized for the people to understand, at the expense of the uniquely Jewish experience.

My opinion is that despite the generalization or trivialization of the Holocaust, it is extremely important for people to learn about the Holocaust. The only way to prevent more genocides like the Holocaust is to know about it. Through the wide distribution of Holocaust films, people can learn about the Holocaust very easily. Though generalization is a side effect, it is the price for helping people to understand the situation.

Lastly, this project has had a great effect on me as a young adult. From the start I wanted to know more about the Holocaust, and thought that film was a very accessible

method of learning about it. I decided to study these films and what they do for people and their understanding of the Holocaust.

Soon after I began watching them, I became interested more and more in Jewish history and the Holocaust. This led me to study more about the reasons behind the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, which helped me to better understand the films I had seen. Learning more about Jewish history and the Holocaust has given me a much larger sense of my Jewish identity. It has helped me to learn about the Jewish way of life and our unique experiences as Jews.

It is also the largest research project I have accomplished, and has surely prepared me for the challenges I will face in my upcoming transition to adulthood.

## REFERENCES

### Text references:

Doneson, Judith E. *The Holocaust in American Cinema* (Second Edition). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

Von Alphen E, Scribner C, Jones R, Littell MS, Loshitzky Y, Liljefors M. "Art and other media in holocaust education and remembrance", Workshop on Remembrance and Representation, The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, January 26 - 28, 2000.

[http://www.holocaustforum.gov.se/conference/official\\_documents/reports/rem\\_3.htm](http://www.holocaustforum.gov.se/conference/official_documents/reports/rem_3.htm)

Brown N. "The Holocaust in Film – Christian ideology and the portrayal of Jews." 1999. The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.  
<http://yad-vashem.org.il/download/education/conf/Brown.pdf>

### Film References

#### Documentary film:

*Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust*, directed by Daniel Anker, 2004.

#### Fictional films:

*The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin, dir. 1940

*Gentleman's Agreement*, Elia Kazan, dir. 1947

*Judgement at Nuremberg*, Stanley Kramer, dir. 1961

*Sophie's Choice*, Alan J. Pakula, dir. 1982

*Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg, dir. 1993

*Holocaust* (TV mini-series), Marvin J. Chomsky, dir.1978

