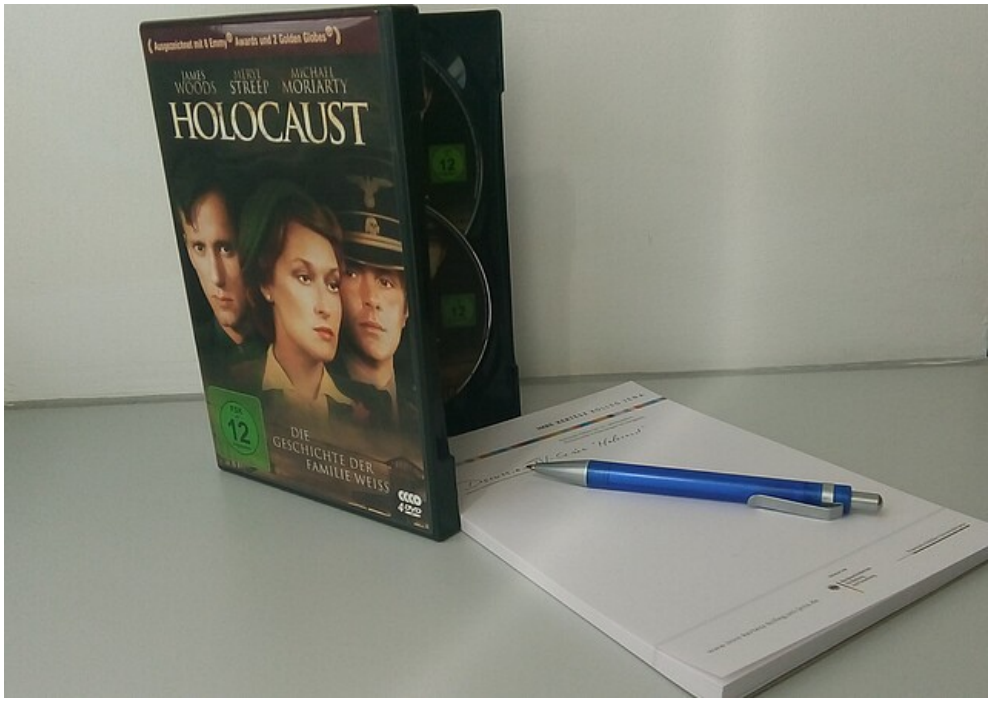

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Revisiting the TV-Series “Holocaust” Thirty Years On

Gespräch

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Thirty years after the American mini-series “Holocaust” was first shown on West-German television and started what has come to be seen as a major turn in German memory culture regarding the Holocaust, the Cultures of History Forum has invited five historians, experts of contemporary history of Central Europe, who had never seen the series before to watch all four episode and discuss it. This is the protocol of the discussion.

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Revisiting the TV-Series “Holocaust” Thirty Years On

In January 1979, the American mini-series Holocaust was first shown on West German television. With an audience of more than 20 million, it had a most profound effect on the German public. 40 years later, historians and journalists in Germany looked back and identified this moment as a turning point in German memory culture. In the numerous articles and documentaries devoted to the anniversary, the series’ impact and reactions to it were the main points of interest. However, the film itself – its aesthetics, historical accuracy, technical features and story-telling – has largely been ignored.[1] To address this gap, the Cultures of History Forum assembled fellows, former fellows and Kolleg staff to watch the four instalments together. No one had ever seen the full series, even though they were well aware of its meaning and impact on German post-war memory culture. Natalia Aleksiun (New York), Violeta Davoliūtė (Vilnius), Anna Machcewicz (Warsaw), Paweł Machcewicz (Warsaw) and Raphael Utz (Jena) share their impressions here.

The discussion was transcribed and edited by Raphael Utz and Eva-Clarita Pettai.

First Reactions

Natalia Aleksiun: What strikes me most is how good this film is after all. Having read about it only as a historical phenomenon, I expected a mostly irrelevant piece of banal and popular television – so I am actually profoundly impressed by it.

Anna Machcewicz: My first impression is that the film is not about history or politics. As the subtitle tells us, it is the story of one family, of the Weiss family. In fact, it is a series about a family made for families who sat on their sofas and watched it together. For me, the most touching characters are Erik Dorf whom we see becoming a devoted Nazi and his wife Martha. They are like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. This is a universal theme.

Violeta Davoliūtė: Initially, I was struck by some of the similarities between this plot and Soviet films about the Second World War produced during the same period. For example, the way in which the protagonists rise to higher levels of political consciousness. But the contrasts are of course stronger – for example, in the storyline of the fall of the German-Jewish bourgeoisie. Perhaps, this is the most obvious difference to the Soviet tradition, which focussed on simple people, simple men, simple women. As a work of television art, I don’t think it is particularly impressive, but not bad for 1978.

Paweł Machcewicz: For me the most important question has always been why it turned out to be so important for the German perception of the Holocaust. Now, I think, I understand it better. First of all, this film is still powerful despite having been made 40 years ago. In my opinion, there are two reasons for this: First, it was probably the first representation in popular culture of such drastic and extreme scenes of naked people killed by Einsatzgruppen. And second, the story is about individuals whom we already got to know in the first episode and have followed throughout all stages of persecution and war.

Raphael Utz: I was surprised by how powerful parts of the film still are, despite the outdated aesthetics – especially the family story. To break the film down into relationships, I think, is one of the key factors in its emotional power. One can relate to that very easily.

Natalia Aleksiun: Holocaust is an American film. I have been wondering, what audience did its makers have in mind? I think this question leads us in two interesting directions: On the one hand, many elements still resonate. Despite all the scenes that appear slightly and unintentionally funny today, there is a real story behind it. You know, we make all this fuss about discovering the phenomenon of 'Holocaust by bullets', but this film was already showing it 40 years ago! You see killing at close range, and repeatedly so, just in case you did not notice it the first time. Even the killing in 'factories of death', supposedly without any personal contact between victims and perpetrators, is personalized, because we have characters on the spot whom we know. Neither the victims, nor the decision-makers on the ground remain nameless or faceless. This is quite an achievement. On the other hand, there is the Jewish story. As we continued watching, especially from the second film onwards, it became more and more evident to me that Holocaust assumed a Jewish audience. The obsession with resistance – I found it remarkable and curious. The characters constantly return to the question whether Jews were cowards, whether they fought back or not. I wonder if this was some kind of educational project, making the audience aware of this problem, or was it working through a question that still tormented the survivors, and their children – the second generation – and, by 1979, almost the third generation? The big question raised in this film concerns Jewish responses: Did they fight – and why didn't they fight?

Raphael Utz: I was completely struck by how Zionist the entire story is, even apart from the fact that the last twelve minutes, during which Rudi Weiss goes to Palestine, were edited out in the version shown on German television in 1979.

Paweł Machcewicz: One of the reasons why the film had such an impact, I believe, is that it introduced a new image of the perpetrator. One of the most crucial characters for that is Martha Dorf. At the time, it was an innovative approach, because it took another twenty years before historians started to look at female perpetrators. It was rather courageous to construct the image of a German wife and mother as the driving force behind her husband, encouraging Erik to make a career in the SS and agreeing with the crimes he committed. So, despite numerous factual inaccuracies, it is difficult to find fault with the film on a fundamental level.

Violeta Davoliūtė: For me, the greatest surprise was how much the film centred on Germany and Germans, and how much this turned into a critique of Jewish acculturation. For the audience, the Weiss family was presented as better Germans than the Germans – loving Wagner and Beethoven and being part of a liberal cultural elite. This might explain the great shock the film produced among the German audience: These people were such good Germans, and we murdered them. In a way, the film is very Germano-centric, but it is a repudiation of this integration into German culture at the same time.

Natalia Aleksiun: I think this is broader than just the question of belonging to German culture or not. Really, this film is like reading Modernity and the Holocaust; it is very much like reading Zygmunt Bauman through the medium of popular culture. Dorf, for example, was a lawyer, and he uses his legal training to advance his career within the Nazi regime. And this, of course, raises questions about the tradition of enlightenment in Western Europe. Actually, we see a sufficient number of educated middle class perpetrators to make that a central argument of the film.

Violeta Davoliūtė: Well, the entire story of the Weiss family is based on how they rejoice and take pride in the fact that they have been integrated into German society. The grandfather as a decorated war veteran is a case in point. And he is beaten up and kills himself. And as for Bertha Weiss, the mother, her response to her husband's suggestion that they should leave Germany is a clear no – she says that she believes in the country of Bach and Beethoven. There is this very genuine love of German culture; in fact,

they are steeped in it. And this is a central leitmotif of the entire narrative. However, all of them die! None of them survives. The only person who actually survives from that family is Rudi Weiss, the one who takes up arms…

Raphael Utz: There is another dimension to this story, about how German the Weiss's are. They are part of German culture, completely and entirely. The interesting question here is about what the effect of this story has on the audience. My take would be: Here we are presented with a medical doctor, an artistic wife, beautiful children – these are characters we would like to identify with. They are characters we would, perhaps, like to be. The majority of the television audience were neither medical doctors nor concert pianists. But all of this touches something in the audience – the desire to identify with people who are better, in order to make us understand what they are going through. It has nothing to do with the fact that they are Jewish, it is simply a technique to achieve viewer identification.

Natalia Aleksiun: This is one of the most crucial issues for me. Would we really like to be these people? When you look at the Weiss family from a Jewish perspective, things become very interesting. Indeed, in the entire film, we only have two kinds of Jews. It's either acculturated or Orthodox. There is nothing in between. And the orthodox Jews are likable but strange figures, even for the main characters who are all not orthodox. Theoretically, we could have had a Weiss family from Berlin who were orthodox Jews. Instead, they are presented as Jewish enough for the audience to know that they were Jews and that they suffered persecution as Jews. The references to all matters Jewish are very light and that's understandable because of the choice of characters. But if you are a Christian and have had some religious education you would know who Moses and Aaron were. So the jokes Moses Weiss makes about his name and his task to take people out of the bunker and about Aaron the little boy who goes with him, all this would have been understood by Catholics and Protestants. So, the Jewish characters we see in the film are not particularly foreign. That is a brilliant choice. Yes, every now and then, we see a Jew in kapote (which makes little sense in the middle of a forest, by the way), but we connect with characters who are not foreign to us.

Paweł Machcewicz: I agree, the film was made in an intelligent way, so that the audience could identify with this educated and affluent family of Berlin Jews. But the film was primarily made with an American audience in mind. So, the effect this film had on the German audience must have been quite unexpected. This shows that all the American de-Nazification efforts in Germany in the late 1940s had actually failed. These efforts had not succeeded in preventing Germans from seeing themselves increasingly as victims of the war, the air raids and the expulsions from Eastern territories. Unexpectedly, thirty years later, just four episodes of an American movie prove to be much more powerful! This is a story about the power of popular culture and television. Since television is powerful no more, what we are looking at is a unique moment when television was a very focussed channel for communicating news and values. Today, there is nothing like it.

Absences: Hitler and the War

Natalia Aleksiun: For 1978, it is remarkable that Hitler does not feature. What the film does instead is to explain the success of the Nazi movement without the easy option of directly pointing to the allure of a charismatic leader. We only see Hitler's portrait in a few shots; there is an explicit statement that he doesn't put things in writing – so it's not like he is not part of it, but the story as it unveils itself does not need him to be physically on the screen. I understood by the second part of the film that he would not be making an appearance, and I find that extremely up to date. The entire discussion about the role of the

centre versus the periphery, the question to what extent the “Final Solution” crystalized through local initiatives, it’s all there. One could actually teach a class on the Holocaust with this film.

Paweł Machcewicz: The fact that there are no regular updates on the progress of the war is not that extraordinary when you compare it with the way the Holocaust is presented in many books and in museums. This film is only about the Holocaust, and it is presented here as a story between Germans and Jews. Nothing really serious is happening apart from that. So, not even the attack against Poland is mentioned.

Violeta Davoliūtė: In the Soviet context, the moment when war is announced in 1941 is so fundamentally crucial. That’s a huge contrast: Here, there is no 1939, 1941 and no 1945 either. In this story, there is no beginning and no end defined by the war.

Natalia Aleksiun: I do wonder: The story does not have a happy-end, and in fact it does not have a clear end at all. We see two little Nazis raised by Lady Macbeth [Martha Dorf – the editor] who have no doubts, no feelings of guilt. And those two kids will go on and there is a seamless transition from war to post-war. I mean – did they watch the film in 1979?

Raphael Utz: To bring it back to the effect a script like that has: If you leave out auctorial information about where we are in the history, as in “Oh, the Germans have just lost the Battle of Stalingrad”, the viewer is lost in the story – just like the characters in the film. I think this is another way in which to achieve identification, sympathy and compassion.

Gender and Viewer Identification

Violeta Davoliūtė: One of the reasons why it must have been so fascinating for Germans is the character of Erik Dorf. He is mysterious, formed and led by his wife Martha – she calls him “her child” – and at the same time, this poses a question which is very relevant in Central and Eastern Europe today: Who was a villain and who was not? So he is a two-faced character, female and male at the same time, and that confusion is very powerful. It remains unclear who and what this man really is. As for the female characters, none of them survive, apart from Inga. It is interesting that the female characters do not play a very positive role.

Anna Machcewicz: Inga Weiss, a German girl married to a Jew, does play an important role destined for women. She survives and it turns out that she gives birth to their son. That, however, is only part of the full version which was not shown to German audiences in 1979.

Natalia Aleksiun: Bertha Weiss deserves particular attention. I can hardly remember a better-told story of a transformation on so many levels. From a life of leisure to activism, from indifference to engagement. Even when she experiences the last moments of what turns out to be a false sense of security, she is presented as a full partner to her husband. In this film, there would be no story without families, and there are no families without women. Despite some moments of stereotypical indulgence, the overall impression is surprisingly nuanced. I think it is possible because the story of the Holocaust is told as a story about families and not about the war.

Violeta Davoliūtė: For me, one of the most interesting aspects was the play with archetypes. For example, the woman on the deportation train whose child died during the horrible journey and who would

not leave the car. Ever since then, we keep seeing this image over and over again in Holocaust films.

Natalia Aleksiun: Well, it happened. And it does represent ultimate cruelty in a nutshell.

Factual Inaccuracies

Paweł Machcewicz: A rather appalling inaccuracy was Jewish police shooting other Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto. This did not happen. Jews were either shot by the Germans or – less frequently – by the Polish auxiliary police.

Violeta Davoliūtė: For me, it was the scene when the young Jewish couple, Helena and Rudi Weiss, are being taken up to the Soviet partisan officer. And then Helena, the young Zionist, seems to be able to speak 'Bolshevik' and ends up kissing him and the entire scene dissolves into laughter and happiness. It really is totally absurd and wrong on so many levels.

Raphael Utz: The absurdity of that scene, I think, has more to do with how, in 1978, the Soviets are portrayed on Western television – this is the nice, cuddly version of the Red Army. Even Americans knew that the US and the Soviet Union were allies in the war.

Anna Machcewicz: For me, the greatest question mark is the story that Inga was sent to Theresienstadt. Is it possible that a German woman was sent there?

Natalia Aleksiun: Can I mention the two greatest inaccuracies? We all noticed the false Polish army uniforms at the Umschlagplatz, and then, perhaps, the barrack in Auschwitz for mothers and children. Everybody has all the hairstyles they want, they have books, they draw and read – and then they get gassed.

Anna Machcewicz: This is a fundamental problem throughout the film. Even in Buchenwald, people look fresh and essentially healthy. We never actually see hunger, we never see the effect of beatings – they always look nice. In this, the film is very conventional.

Natalia Aleksiun: The very mild depiction of violence is a major issue, I agree. The scenes at the Umschlagplatz were extremely moderate. All descriptions we know about of the loading of the trains tell us that it did not look like that at all.

Raphael Utz: Perhaps this is one of the reasons for this very, very long storyline about Karl Weiss's painting. We see well-fed actors discussing paintings that clearly show a very different kind of reality. Perhaps this serves to remind audiences, that this film is only a film and does not represent reality.

Learning about the Holocaust

Paweł Machcewicz: Intellectually, we don't learn very much from this film. However, for me, the emotional dimension of actually seeing normal people either becoming perpetrators or being taken out of their normal, apparently safe lives and going through all the stages of persecution is still important. We know this from books, of course, but this is an important message, and it is ideally suited for a film.

Anna Machcewicz: The scene which moved me most: When Anna Weiss felt so trapped and locked in, both physically and metaphorically, by the situation that she runs out of the flat, tears off the yellow star and is then cornered by Nazi thugs and raped. It made me understand what it must have felt like not being able to escape. It was the most touching scene.

Natalia Aleksiun: I did not watch the film to learn about the Holocaust. It is a testament to the limits of representation, of course. And yet, it is amazing how much information is contained in this film. We even get the pan-European scope! Because of how the aesthetics have changed since the late 1970s, it is doubtful whether students today would react positively to it; and yet, it could serve as a spine of a narrative about the Holocaust.

Raphael Utz: What I learned: We, as historians, tend to overlook the emotions of the people involved. And as we are presented with a plausible emotional interpretation of the Holocaust by this film, we remember that people were not only perpetrators, victims, bystanders or collaborators but real people. The Holocaust was the reality of their lives and deaths. And this is, perhaps, the most extraordinary thing a representation can do – to remind us of that reality.

Footnotes

1. See for example, Christian Berndt, Dieses Mitleid mit den Opfern war neu, Deutschlandfunk Kultur (23 January 2019); René Schlott, Der Wendepunkt in der Erinnerungskultur, Spiegel Online (07 January 2019); Benedikt Frank, Als eine Fernsehserie Schockwellen auslöste, Süddeutsche Zeitung (07 January 2019), all retrieved 11 April 2019.