

Operation Finale depicts the 1960 capture of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina

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Directed by Chris Weitz; written by Matthew Orton

The Israeli operation to abduct fugitive Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann from Argentina and transport him to Jerusalem for trial was a significant moment in post-World War II history. The Eichmann Trial in 1961, discussed in Hannah Arendt's well-known *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere, served to bring home the reality of the Nazi genocide and the Final Solution to a worldwide audience.

The May 1960 capture of Eichmann, carried out by a team of Mossad agents, was the subject of two television films decades ago. *Operation Finale*, based largely on the memoir of Peter Malkin, one of those agents, now brings it to the movie screen. The screenplay is by Matthew Orton and the film is directed by Chris Weitz (*A Better Life*, *About a Boy*).

The plan to snatch Eichmann (Ben Kingsley) from his home in Argentina, where he lived under the name of Richard Klement, had its genesis, shown on screen, in the discovery by a blind half-Jewish refugee from the Nazis, Lothar Hermann (Peter Strauss), that a friend of his daughter Sylvia (Haley Lu Richardson) was named Klaus Eichmann (Joe Alwyn), and was possibly the son of the Nazi leader. Hermann notified German authorities in Frankfurt.

German officials alert the Israelis, who are at first skeptical and hesitant to proceed. Finally a team of agents is assembled, including Peter Malkin (Oscar Isaac). Although Malkin is not in charge, the story is seen through his eyes and he is portrayed as a kind of moral center of the story. We see the mechanics of the operation, including the preparation of false passports and the careful discussion of tactics for a kidnapping in violation of Argentine law. The decision is made to bring Eichmann to trial, rather than assassinate him, for the purpose of putting the entire Nazi Holocaust in the dock, and not just one of its individual architects.

There are some interesting moments. Haley Lu Richardson, in a fairly small role as Sylvia, is effective at showing the terror of this Jewish refugee when she finds herself at a meeting of Nazis to which she has been invited by her friend Klaus, a vicious anti-Semite. She runs out of

the gathering, and later tells him that she herself is Jewish.

Also of interest is the brief depiction of the network of Nazis who had earlier found refuge in Peronist Argentina (dictator Juan Peron had been overthrown in 1955), and of their protectors remaining inside the Argentine military and government apparatus.

The overriding weakness of *Operation Finale* is to a great extent bound up with the specific subject of the film itself, the choice to focus on the capture of the Nazi war criminal, without much historical context. The entire episode is presented very much as a thriller. Although everyone knows the outcome of the story, we are meant to see the events as the agents experienced them. Will they succeed in their plan to snatch Eichmann as he disembarks at a quiet bus stop near his home? Will they succeed in getting him to a safe-house where he will be held for nine days while all the arrangements are finalized for spiriting him out of Argentina on an Israeli plane? Above all, will they be able to get his signature on a signed confession, which is crucial for the entire operation?

There are inevitable tensions within the Israeli team of agents, principally a matter of dealing with the understandable rage of those who lost their loved ones at the hands of the Nazis and are now inclined toward revenge. Malkin has his own reasons for anger and bitter frustration, as depicted in flashbacks showing the killing of his sister and her three children in one of the mass shootings carried out by the Einsatzgruppen, the SS paramilitary death squads who annihilated up to 2 million Jews. To the extent that *Operation Finale* deals with broader themes, it is in these scenes in which the more hotheaded agents are reminded to look at the larger significance of their assignment. Malkin is himself the reflection of what might be termed the successful struggle to sublimate his anger for a greater purpose.

Occasionally ignoring his superiors' instructions, he strikes up conversations with Eichmann, gradually wearing down his resistance and finally securing the Nazi's signature with a promise that he will be able to see his family one more time—a promise that is of course not kept and could not

be kept under the circumstances. Kingsley is excellent in a performance that calls for flashes of defiance as well as wit. As Kingsley shows, Eichmann was more than the man who pretended at his trial in 1961 to be simply an obedient bureaucrat, and whose performance at that time led Arendt to draw the exaggerated conclusion that he represented simply “the banality of evil.”

The climax of *Operation Finale* comes with the successful departure of the agents and Eichmann, bound for Israel. The trial is briefly shown and the verdict and execution of Eichmann in 1962 are duly noted on screen, but this is a film primarily about the “operation,” and not what came before or after.

The film is consequently long on suspense and quite short on history and insight. Argentina is, perhaps understandably, only a backdrop here as the Israeli agents go about their work, but a way could surely have been found to draw out more fully the connections between the Nazi fugitives and their Argentine fascist defenders.

Nor is the context of the Cold War seriously examined in *Operation Finale*. There is a fleeting reference to the shooting down of the CIA’s U-2 spy plane over Soviet airspace, which took place just days before the capture of Eichmann. What about the fact that the US government had long before lost any interest in pursuing Nazis, and had, in fact, been rehabilitating some leading military and intelligence figures for the purpose of waging the Cold War against the Soviet Union? This is not examined.

There is one historical reference in the film that is a bit surprising, however. When we first meet Sylvia Hermann, she is watching a film in Buenos Aires. The movie is Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959). We see the scene on screen in which Frankie (Troy Donahue) lashes out at Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), a young African-American woman passing as white. Meanwhile, Klaus Eichmann and a few friends are making noise a few rows behind Sylvia. She turns around in annoyance, and later meets Klaus, which is how the friendship of the young Nazi supporter and the Jewish girl begins.

Perhaps director Weitz is drawing a parallel between Sylvia and Sarah Jane, between the racism depicted in Sirk’s film and the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. This is clearly a fictional device and a very strained one. The director appears to have included it as a tribute to his mother, who is the same Susan Kohner who played Sarah Jane almost 60 years ago. In any case, this adds little to the film.

Operation Finale is a conventional account. The capture and trial of Eichmann were of course historic, but here they are primarily depicted as the victory of the Jewish state, and proof of the necessity of the state of Israel as the exclusive

haven for the Jewish people, to ensure the defeat of anti-Semitism and avenge the Nazi mass murder. This is not spelled out, but the theme is clear. It is underscored by a brief appearance in the film of none other than David Ben-Gurion (Simon Russell Beale), the founding prime minister of Israel. Ben-Gurion gives a brief pep talk to the agents just before they depart on their mission.

The complacent pro-Zionist outlook is refuted by history itself. What has happened since the days of Ben-Gurion? The development of Israel in the 58 years since the capture of Adolf Eichmann shows that much more than the trial and execution of this high-ranking Nazi is required to put an end to anti-Semitism and all forms of racism and national chauvinism.

In the Middle East this whole period has been one of continuous war, punctuated by periods of relative quiet. After 70 years, a resolution of the crisis provoked by the imperialist postwar settlement that led to the establishment of Israel is no closer. The more than 50-year occupation of Palestinian territory seized in the 1967 war, and the oppression of the Palestinian people over generations, has turned Israel into a pariah state, quite different from its position in the early years of its existence. The dead end of Zionism itself is understood by vast portions of humanity, including increasingly by the younger generation of Jews in Europe and America. In Israel itself the Arab population remains second class citizens, now further marginalized by the recently enacted “Nation-State Law.”

The continuous rightward trajectory of Zionism finds its expression in the Netanyahu government’s close ties with such fascistic figures as Viktor Orban in Hungary and Donald Trump in the US. At the same time, the policies and crimes of the Zionist regime serve to strengthen anti-Semitic forces around the world.

These issues are not within the scope of a film on Eichmann’s capture, but a profound examination of the Eichmann story should provoke serious thought about them. *Operation Finale*, rarely rising above the level of a suspenseful thriller that bases itself on the great crimes of the Nazis but goes no further, does not do justice to the complexity of its subject matter.



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