Forty years since first German broadcast of the “Holocaust” series

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Earlier this year, German public broadcasters aired the 1978 American TV series “Holocaust” on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of its first broadcast in West Germany, in 1979. On that occasion, the series shook West German society, with an estimated 50 percent of the total population watching at least one episode.

In 1979, more than three decades after the end of World War II and the fall of the Nazi regime, the series marked the biggest public discussion of the Holocaust in post-war German society. Today, amid a resurgence of fascist forces internationally, including in Germany itself, the series is as relevant as ever.

The four-part series recounts the fate of the assimilated German-Jewish Weiss family, in Berlin under the Nazi regime from 1935 to 1945. The father, Dr. Josef Weiss (Fritz Weaver), is a doctor, and the mother (Rosemary Harris) is a great enthusiast of German culture, especially German music. Despite the growing political persecution of Jews and the ever-greater restrictions on their professional and everyday lives in Nazi Germany, she opposes the idea of emigrating until it is too late for the family to leave.

The series begins in 1935 with the wedding of their oldest son, Karl (James Woods), an artist, with the non-Jewish Inga (Meryl Streep). Her family are convinced Nazis. Apart from Karl the Weisses have two other children: Rudi (Joseph Bottoms) and Anna (Blanche Baker).

In the ensuing three parts, the viewers witness how the family is torn apart. It falls victim to the rapidly escalating persecution of the Jews by the Nazis and, with only a few exceptions, is murdered.

The father, a respected doctor in Berlin, is prohibited from treating non-Jewish patients. Then Kristallnacht, the nationwide, Nazi-instigated anti-Jewish pogrom of November 9, 1938, marks a turning point for the family. The grandfather’s bookstore is violently assaulted by a Nazi mob, and he himself is horribly humiliated. The oldest son, Karl, is arrested and deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. He will later be deported to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. The Nazis subject him to brutal torture after they discover that he and a group of camp inmates have drawn depictions of the atrocities of the Nazis.

The father, who is Polish and not a German citizen, is deported shortly after the pogrom, and is eventually imprisoned, along with some 400,000 other Jews from Poland and abroad, in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Anna and her mother remain in Berlin. When a group of Nazis violently rape Anna, she suffers a nervous breakdown. Inga and Frau Weiss decide to send Anna to a hospital for the mentally ill. There she is soon gassed along with hundreds of thousands of others, as part of the so-called “Action T4,” a pre-planned mass murder of mentally and physically ill people and children in Nazi Germany.

Shortly after Anna’s death, her mother is also deported to the Warsaw Ghetto, where she joins her husband. She will later be sent to Auschwitz, where she is gassed. Karl and his father are killed just weeks before the end of the war: Karl dies after the brutal torture he suffered in the camp, and his father is killed on one of the many so called “death marches” that the SS organized to kill the last concentration camp prisoners as the Red Army advanced toward Germany and liberated one camp after another. Apart from Karl’s wife, Inga, Rudi is the only one of the family who survives. He joins the Soviet partisans and fights against the Wehrmacht in Nazi-occupied Ukraine and Poland.

The fate of the Weiss family is contrasted with the career of Erik Dorf (Michael Moriarty). Dorf is the son of a baker who had committed suicide, driven to despair by the economic crisis of the early 1930s. We meet the son first as a demoralized and unemployed lawyer in 1935. However, he is soon pushed by his ambitious wife, who maintains close ties to leading figures in the Nazi party, to rise rapidly in a career in the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), the paramilitary elite corps of the Nazi party. He eventually rises to become the right-hand man of Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) and the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA), one of the worst Nazi criminals. Dorf becomes deeply implicated in the organization of the mass murder of European Jews.

The RSHA was created in 1939 through the unification of the SD and the SS. It played a central role in the planning and implementation of the genocide of European Jewry as well as in the brutal persecution and oppression of all “political” and “racial enemies” of the Third Reich. The SS-Einsatzgruppen, which murdered some 1.5 million Jews in the occupied Soviet Union, were directly subordinate to Heydrich. After the end of the war, Erik Dorf commits suicide, as did many leading Nazis who feared criminal prosecution by the Allied authorities.

Even though the series occasionally verges on the melodramatic, and despite some minor historical inaccuracies (the major deportation of Polish Jews from Germany, for instance, occurred before and not after Kristallnacht), it is remarkably clear-sighted, sharp and comprehensive.

The juxtaposition of Dorf’s family and the fate of the Weiss family allows the series to convey the scope and different stages of the Holocaust in an impressive and comprehensive manner, starting from the legal and political persecution in Nazi Germany, through the ghettos and mass shootings in Poland and the occupied Soviet Union, up to the gassing in the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland. The heroic struggle of the Soviet partisans against the Nazis is portrayed in detail, while the viewers can follow the different stages in the planning of the genocide through the character of Dorf. Several of the actors, especially Meryl Streep as Inga and Michael Moriarty as Erik Dorf, offer extraordinary performances that contribute considerably to the impact the film makes on its viewers.

The significance of the series, and the fact it was produced in the US, not in Germany, cannot be understood outside the larger historical context. For decades after the war, the crimes of the Nazis, including the Holocaust, were barely discussed in public in post-war Germany. This reactionary climate was a direct result of the postwar order. The suppression of the revolutionary struggles of the working class by the Soviet bureaucracy and the Stalinist parties throughout Europe made possible the temporary restabilization of capitalism in the wake of the

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massive destruction caused by the war.

With the beginning of the Cold War, the US largely abandoned the prosecution of Nazi criminals. Instead, old Nazis and officers of the Wehrmacht were integrated into the US army and CIA for the Cold War against the Soviet Union. In Germany the new elites were recruited from the old. In all essential aspects of social life—politics, economy or culture—former Nazis continued to play a major role. In 1951, a law (supported by all parties in the West German Bundestag (parliament)) came into effect guaranteeing all former members of the NSDAP the right to once again become state officials, thus allowing tens if not hundreds of thousands of Nazis to continue their careers in post-war Germany as if nothing had happened.

Likewise, doctors and lawyers—the two professions with the highest percentage of NSDAP-party membership—who had been deeply implicated in the crimes of the Nazis against Jews, political opponents and the mentally and physically ill, were never put on trial and were able to continue their careers.

The state prosecutor of the German state of Hesse, Fritz Bauer, faced massive opposition from the German judiciary, which was staffed from top to bottom by old Nazis, when he began to organize the first trial against criminals from Auschwitz on German soil in the early 1960s. (He famously said, "As soon as I step out of my office, I'm on enemy territory.") Despite the Auschwitz trials in Germany and the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in the early 1960s, and even though opposition to the old Nazis in postwar Germany played an important role in the student movement of 1968, the Holocaust remained barely discussed in German public life. Up until the late 1970s, there was not even an official nationwide commemoration of Kristallnacht.

The first comprehensive study of the Nazi genocide, "The Destruction of European Jewry," was authored by the Austrian-Jewish historian Raul Hilberg, who had emigrated to the United States. Having written and published the book in English in 1961, Hilberg was unable for two decades to find a German publishing house willing to publish a translation. After rejections from several major publishing houses, it was issued in 1982 by the small Berlin publishing house of Olle & Wolter.

German historians only really started to investigate the Holocaust in the 1980s. However, a real turn by a new generation of German historians, including figures like Christian Gerlach and Dieter Pohl, toward serious and comprehensive studies of the dynamics of the Holocaust, the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and the role of the Wehrmacht in these crimes, only occurred in the 1990s. (See also: The debate in Germany over the crimes of Hitler's Wehrmacht)

It is indicative of the prevailing climate in 1979 that before the actual airing of the series, the public broadcaster WDR came under bitter attack for its decision to show it. The management of the WDR felt forced to make a compromise, broadcasting the series only at a relatively late hour in the day. Neo-Nazis tried to prevent the broadcast by bombing two of the WDR's stations.

The enormous impact of the series on mass consciousness, reflected in the overwhelmingly positive response to it, came as something of a surprise, and represented a turning point in views on the Nazi era. Polls showed that 86 percent of the series' viewers discussed it with their families and friends. Tens of thousands called the WDR and expressed, often in tears, their shock and feelings of guilt about the crimes that had taken place. Former soldiers of the Wehrmacht called the broadcaster and confirmed that the atrocities that the series showed had in fact taken place.

German historian Miriam Rürüp explained the significance of the series in an interview: "What was really impressive, however, was how the four-part series, which in its main concept followed the principles of a soap opera, was received. It starts with a wedding, in a very classical manner, and then you are being drawn into history. In 1979, the war had not been over for long—but it was over long enough for another generation to have emerged, which now questioned their parents: 'Where were you then? Did you speak to your parents? What happened? Why have we not heard about this?' In this way, this series could contribute within families to a first confrontation with what had actually happened under National Socialism."

The series also helped encourage a deeper study of the Holocaust in the historical sciences. The 1980s saw several projects documenting the Nazi period on a local level, including the oral history project "Bavaria in the NS-period" and the exhibition on "Resistance and Persecution in Essen." Memorial sites at former concentration camps held several exhibitions which discussed the Holocaust much more forthrightly than had been the case before. There were also a growing number of grassroots initiatives at schools and in neighborhoods attempting to examine the history of National Socialism in their given city or region.

At the same time, the changed social and political climate triggered a massive counter-offensive by the right, led by the historian Ernst Nolte. Since at least 1979, Nolte had begun to systematically work on the justification of the crimes of the Nazis, and especially the Holocaust, as a "response to the violence of the Russian Revolution." Auschwitz, Nolte declared, had, in fact, been a reaction to the "Gulag Archipelago" and Hitler had only committed his "Asiatic deed" because the Nazis "regarded themselves and their kind as potential or actual victims of an 'Asiatic deed'"—that is, the Russian Revolution.

Back then, Nolte and his supporters, including historians Andreas Hilgruber and Michael Stürmer, remained in a minority.

This year, however, the series was shown under conditions where Nolte's views are regularly advanced in the German parliament by the neo-fascist *Alternative für Deutschland*. They have been further developed by academics like Jörg Baberowski, and are defended by significant sections of the political establishment and the media, because the return of German militarism requires a relativization of the crimes of the Nazis. The "Holocaust" series has thus lost none of its relevance, and deserves a broad audience.

The series "Holocaust" is available on YouTube.

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