



Guide for Teachers

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Introduction

Whether asking about the roots of genocide or the motivation behind heroic individual acts of kindness and self-sacrifice, a key concept for students learning about the Holocaust is **empathy**. Yael Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished* is an especially powerful classroom resource because of Hersonski's multi-faceted approach to empathy. We are asked to empathize with the innocent people trapped on screen and the reactions of Ghetto survivors reliving their pasts while watching the film. We see Hersonski probe testimony by the Nazi cameraman responsible for the footage, questioning his failure to empathize with his unwilling subjects. Finally, we are asked to reevaluate our sometimes-numbing relationship to Holocaust documentary footage and acknowledge the essential humanity of each person on screen – either through a freeze-frame of a telling look into the lens or by the devastating reminder that each body sliding into a mass grave is a fellow human being, someone's mother, father, sibling, or child.

The film offers many different layers of possible analysis and classroom discussion; it could be used as a jumping-off point for a broader lesson about the Holocaust, or it could promote further discussion at the end of a Holocaust curriculum. Teachers are invited to use this study guide as a resource for lessons about the Holocaust and *A Film Unfinished*, with the understanding that it reflects only a small sample of topics for discussion and available resources about the Holocaust.

Historical Background: Nazism and the Holocaust

Hitler's Road to Power and Nazi Anti-Semitism

After World War I (1914-1918) and the punitive Treaty of Versailles left Germany in a state of economic ruin and social upheaval, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were able to rise to prominence in the 1920's and power in the 1930's through a mix of rabid nationalism and brutally effective scapegoating. They used fashionable pseudo-science on race and genetics to claim that pure "Aryan" Germans with fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes were "super men," destined to rule the world. Other races, especially European Jews and Roma (formerly known as Gypsies), were inferior, destined for enslavement or elimination. Average German gentiles, suffering in the aftermath of war and economic collapse, found themselves all too susceptible to the flattery and deception of Nazi ideology.

Hitler put his anti-Semitism at the forefront of his involvement with the Nazi party from the very beginning. While imprisoned following an attempted coup in 1924, Hitler wrote a book, *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"), which clearly outlined his governing philosophy, theories about racial superiority, and hatred for Jews. The book became the ideological foundation for the Nazi party as their popularity rose and they claimed increasing numbers of seats in the Reichstag (parliament) with each consecutive election. When Hitler assumed the role of Chancellor with his first parliamentary majority in 1933, he quickly consolidated his power into a single-party state while passing laws that gradually stripped Jewish citizens of their civil rights – to hold public or academic jobs, to marry, to attend public school, to own a business, and so on. These laws were met with limited resistance in Germany, which the Nazis quickly crushed, and few denunciations overseas, as Western leaders struggled with the effects of the Great Depression in their own countries and many

feared alienating the powerful ruler of a rising Germany. The most famous, comprehensive, and restrictive group of these laws were the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which effectively stripped German Jews of their citizenship. Religious observance or ethnic identity did not matter to the Nazis, whose racial/genetic understanding of Judaism led them to decide that anyone with three Jewish grandparents would be considered a Jew under the law, even if the individual or his/her grandparents had converted to Christianity. In 1941, all Jewish people in Nazi-occupied territory were required to identify themselves with a yellow Star of David sewn to their clothes. By fostering an atmosphere of hate and isolation, then stripping Jews of their roles and rights within German society, Hitler and the Nazis were able to create an environment in which the status of Jewish citizens and recognition of their essential humanity was gradually eroded until the German and other gentile populations were largely indifferent to the eventual mass murder of Europe's Jews.

From Discrimination to Holocaust

As Hitler invaded Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938, then Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies followed their conquering armies. Local populations were quickly subjugated, Jewish citizens were identified (often with the help of local collaborators), and then they were deported to ghettos or concentration camps. Often starting with neighborhoods that had a large, homogenous Jewish population, the Nazis walled off the area like a prison and moved Jews from nearby towns and cities into the increasingly dense ghetto. Millions of Jewish people died of starvation, disease, or random violence inside the ghettos, and the few who survived were ultimately deported a second time to death camps. Homosexuals, Roma, and political dissidents were also targeted for persecution and death.

The Nazis were deliberate and methodical in their planning for a conquered world without Jews. At first, European Jews were starved, worked to death, or executed by firing squad in ghettos and concentration camps. Nazis massacred tens of thousands of people over mass graves in forests, like the ones at Babi Yar, outside Kiev, and Ponar, on the outskirts of Vilna. They used sealed trucks, disguised as ambulances, to suffocate a dozen people at a time with carbon monoxide. However, the Nazis considered these methods expensive and inefficient, especially when faced with Poland's vast population of three million Jewish people (about a third of Europe's total Jewish population). Thus, a group of high-ranking Nazis – among them, the infamous Adolf Eichmann and Reinhard Heydrich – met and conceived a series of death factories, where modern industrial technology was put in service of mass murder on an unimaginable scale.



Each day, Nazis brought trainloads of people by the thousands to places deep in the countryside with names like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and Sobibor. The moment they stepped off the train, a camp commandant would decide who among the group would be sent to slave labor and who would die immediately. Those selected for death were told to prepare for a disinfectant shower, but were instead led into chambers that filled with a toxic gas called Zyklon-B, specially engineered by Nazi chemists for this purpose. Bodies of murdered Jews were then incinerated in crematoria. In a single

day at Auschwitz-Birkenau, up to 6,000 people were murdered this way. Their possessions, clothing, hair, and even the gold fillings in their teeth were collected and reused by the Nazi war machine as if they were industrial byproducts.

Resistance and Rescue

In spite of the terrible circumstances, a few exceptional gentiles acted heroically to aid their Jewish neighbors. Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial institute, maintains a comprehensive database to honor ordinary Europeans who risked certain death to defy Nazi terror. For example, Jean Phillippe was appointed chief of police in Toulouse, France by the Nazi-allied government and used his position to provide Jews in hiding with false identity papers that would allow them to escape to neutral Switzerland. When asked to hand over a list of Jews living in his precinct, Phillippe refused. He resigned his post and worked in hiding for the underground French Resistance. Phillippe was eventually captured and executed in 1944 by the Gestapo, the Nazis' fearsome state police and intelligence agency.

Many exceptional Jews also committed acts of resistance against the Nazis. For some, this meant survival in hiding like Anne Frank and her family. For others, it meant escape to Allied nations with valuable intelligence that exposed Nazi vulnerabilities. In October of 1944, Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau staged a dramatic revolt, blowing up two of the crematoria and killing several guards. The revolt was quickly contained, and the prisoners responsible were executed. In the area that is now Belarus and Lithuania, Tuvia Bielski and his brothers gathered Byelorussian Jews into a forest community where they provided for anyone who could escape the ghettos, young and elderly alike, while staging resistance attacks against Nazi troops and their local collaborators. By the end of the war, 1,200 Jews survived in the forest with the Bielskis. Other Jewish partisan groups appeared throughout

occupied Europe, often organizing in the ghettos before escaping to the forests, where they could stage attacks on Nazi interests.

The End of the War and a Future for Survivors

Until the bitter end of the war in 1945, the systematic murder of European Jews remained a high priority for the Nazi leadership. Valuable military resources were diverted from the battlefields to keep the death camps operating. When concentration camp officers learned of nearby Allied advances, they marched thousands of Jewish prisoners to other camps deeper inside Nazi territory. Many Jews died during these brutally long marches, some only days before liberation finally arrived. Nazis in charge of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the longest-operating death camp in Europe, attempted to dismantle the remaining crematoria to hide their crimes from advancing Soviet troops. As the war in Europe ended, the first images of the liberated concentration camps reached a world largely unprepared for what they saw. Although Nazi anti-Semitism was openly expressed and widely reported since the mid-1930's, their strict control over information and a pervasive, casual lack of concern for European Jews left many stunned and appalled to discover the vast scope of Nazi crimes against humanity.

By the end of Nazi rule in Europe, 6 million Jewish people had been murdered, about two thirds of the continent's Jewish population. This figure, once an estimate, has been confirmed by decades of effort to record the name of every murdered Jew in the archives of Yad Vashem, although the Nazis' depraved thoroughness in genocide makes it ultimately impossible to identify all their victims. In addition to the Jewish victims, Nazis murdered approximately 3 million Roma, homosexuals, political dissidents and non-Jewish Poles.

Jewish survivors received much-needed food and medical treatment from Allied forces, but they were faced with a grim

reality: most of their homes were completely destroyed or given to gentiles who now had no intent of leaving. Few survivors had any family or friends left alive, and even fewer desired to return to the places where their neighbors welcomed their exile and murder. Jewish survivors were often confined to displaced persons camps, set up inside the same concentration camps where they had been imprisoned, now administered with humane treatment by the Allied armies and the Red Cross. Many survivors eventually made their way to the United States after vivid press coverage of Nazi atrocities cajoled the U.S. government into relaxing its restrictive immigration quotas. Simultaneously, international Jewish aid organizations and Jewish soldiers in the Allied armies helped survivors leave Europe for British-controlled Palestine, in spite of tight restrictions on Jewish immigration. Former Jewish partisan fighters joined the leadership of Israel's nascent defense forces, while many other Holocaust survivors were able to begin life anew in the Jewish state following its independence in 1948.

Discussion Questions

1. In many ways, the average German's response to Nazism and the Holocaust reflects a failure to empathize (or maintain a sense of common humanity) with their Jewish neighbors and fellow citizens. Can you think of a situation where you were slow to empathize with someone's suffering because he or she is different from you? What are some ways we can better connect with people of different backgrounds and understand their problems as though they were our own?
2. Different people take different lessons from the history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. What lesson or meaning do you take from the history you have learned? What are specific steps you can take to prevent genocide from happening again?



The Warsaw Ghetto

The largest Jewish ghetto in occupied Europe was in Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Before the Nazi invasion in September of 1939, around 375,000 Polish Jews lived in Warsaw (30% of the city's total population), most of whom were well assimilated into Polish society. They comprised the largest Jewish community in Europe and the second largest in the world, after New York City. The Nazi occupation brought enforcement of the Nuremberg laws and the forced transfer of Jews from all parts of the city into a small area of less than 2 square miles. As more Jews were forced into the Ghetto from nearby towns, the Nazis built high walls around the Ghetto area in April of 1940, sealing them inside. The population of the tiny Ghetto reached an estimated 450,000 Jews from all walks of life, living with an average of 7 people per room. Able-bodied Jewish prisoners were compelled to work as slave laborers in nearby factories. The only benefits of this work were the ability to leave the Ghetto for several hours each day and slightly more generous food rations that could be conserved for one's family or traded for other goods. Children, the disabled, and the elderly succumbed to starvation and illness in unimaginable numbers – 83,000 people died between 1940 and mid-1942, alone. Mass transfer of people from the Ghetto to death camps began in July of 1942.

In spite of the dire conditions, civil society, culture, and an underground economy were kept alive in the Ghetto to maintain a semblance of normal life. The Judenrat (Jewish Council) was created by Nazi authorities to provide the Ghetto with an

illusion of self-government. The chairman, Adam Czerniakow, was charged with distributing food, medicine, and other meager resources to the Jewish-run hospitals, orphanages, and schools inside the Ghetto. Nazi administrators frequently kidnapped groups of workers from the Ghetto, and Czerniakow was obligated to collect cash and valuables from the Jews inside to ransom the hostages. He committed suicide in July of 1942 to avoid assisting the Nazis with mass deportations to death camps. A Jewish police force was also established, mainly to act as a proxy army for the Nazis to curtail the many sophisticated smuggling operations that thrived throughout the Ghetto. The smugglers were generally young children, small enough to be able to slip through tunnels dug under the walls, at great risk. In addition to essentials, they brought back specialty foods and luxury items, which were bought and sold by wealthy prisoners at astronomical prices. Restaurants and bars existed alongside small businesses to service the few who could afford them. Educators set up secret schools for the children, rabbis lead clandestine prayer services, and theater companies and orchestras performed regularly. Emanuel Ringelblum, a historian and political organizer, set up a vast secret archive to record a history of life and Nazi crime inside the Ghetto. He buried the papers in milk canisters throughout the Ghetto area; many, but not all, were recovered after the war and now reside in Warsaw's Jewish Historical Institute.



One of the most significant Jewish resistance movements in Europe took place inside the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. Led by the Jewish Fighting Organization and armed with smuggled weapons and homemade explosives, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began with a January 18, 1943 attack on the *umschlagplatz*, the plaza where Nazis grouped people for deportation to Treblinka and Auschwitz. This small assault by nine young Jews with pistols and grenades put the mass deportations on hold while the SS organized an assault intended to empty the Ghetto and defeat armed resistance. On April 19, 1943, elite SS soldiers marched into the Ghetto and were driven back out by sniper bullets, machine guns, and molotov cocktails. Armed Jewish resistance continued with great success for 28 days, resisting Nazi advances longer than the entire Polish Army. The Nazis had to burn the Ghetto to rubble with firebombs to end the Uprising. During the bombing, some of the fighters and several of their leaders were able to escape through the lethal labyrinth of the Warsaw sewers to safety in the forests,

where they continued their resistance activities with Polish and Soviet partisans. In spite of great, continued danger, some of the Ghetto Fighters survived to emigrate to Israel at the end of the war.

Discussion Questions

1. Given a choice, would you take Adam Czerniakow's job (administering the affairs of the Warsaw Ghetto)? In an environment where impossible choices have to be made to help some people at the expense of others, would you be willing to accept a leadership role? Why or why not?
2. In the film, Hersonski describes Emanuel Ringelblum's Ghetto archives as a form of resistance. Do you agree? Why or why not?



Additional Readings and Resources on the Holocaust:

Berenbaum, Michael and Yisrael Gutman, eds. *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Indiana University Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1998.

Facing History and Ourselves – www.facinghistory.org

Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Pocket Books, 1953.

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Pocket Books, 1959.

Hilberg, Raul; Stanislaw Staron and Josef Karmisz, eds. *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*. Elephant Paperbacks Edition, 1999.

Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation - www.jewishpartisans.org/

Kurzman, Dan. *The Bravest Battle: the 28 Days of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Da Capo Press Edition, 1993.

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation - <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/>

Additional Films about the Holocaust:

Night and Fog

1955; Alain Resnais, director; this documentary about memory and the Holocaust juxtaposes archival footage of the liberated concentration camps with contemporary color footage of the abandoned camps

Triumph of the Spirit

1989; Robert M. Young, director; although it focuses on one Greek boxer's experience at Auschwitz, this drama takes an illuminating, multi-faceted approach to depicting daily survival in the death camp

The Pianist

2003; Roman Polanski, director; simultaneously a dramatization of pianist Wlasylaw Szpilman's true story of surviving the Warsaw Ghetto and a reflection of Polanski's own childhood experience in the Ghetto

Korczak

1990; Andrzej Wajda, director; a dramatization of the final years in the life of Polish educator, Janusz Korczak, who founded and ran a large orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto until the Nazis ordered all the children in his care to Auschwitz – Korczak famously chose to die with them

Geburtig

2002; Robert Schindel & Lukas Stepanik, directors/writers; a drama about the legacy of the Holocaust among a diverse cast of characters in contemporary Europe that also addresses the inherent problems with making films about the Holocaust

Partisans of Vilna

1986; Joshua Waletzky, director/writer; this documentary tells the story of armed Jewish resistance in and around the Vilna Ghetto, with many surviving partisans giving firsthand accounts of their hardships and triumphs

Historical Background: Propaganda

Nazi Propaganda Films

The first Nazi propaganda films date back to 1927, before the party controlled the German Reichstag (parliament), when the party's lead propagandist, Josef Goebbels, commissioned mobile film projectors to travel throughout the German countryside to promote Nazi party candidates and their ideology. After Hitler's appointment to Chancellor, Goebbels was named Minister of Propaganda and Public Information, using all media – film, radio, newspapers, public art, architecture, and public demonstrations – to tighten the Nazis' hold on power and create a cult of personality around Hitler. He ordered the burning of books, films, and other works of art that were believed to counter Nazi ideals. In November of 1938, Goebbels orchestrated the massive, deadly, and well-organized anti-Semitic riots throughout Germany now known as *Kristallnacht* ("The Night of Broken Glass") in response to the killing of a German diplomat in France by Herschel Grynszpan, a young Jew. Throughout the war, Goebbels remained part of Hitler's inner circle, presiding over massive campaigns of fear mongering, disinformation, and anti-Semitism. In the war's final days, Goebbels and his wife committed suicide, following Hitler to their literal end, but not before executing all six of their own children.

The massive, Goebbels-orchestrated Nuremberg rally of September 1934 provided the central dramatic set piece for Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a popular and effective propaganda film. Riefenstahl was a dancer, actress, and novice film director in Berlin when she caught Hitler's eye in 1933. *Triumph of the Will* uses evocative composition and montage techniques (in this case, ironically, as most of the established concepts of propagandistic montage were developed by Soviet filmmakers like Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin) to extol the virtues of Hitler, the Nazi party, and their vision of Aryan

perfection. The film is an idealized portrait of German exceptionalism, and does not articulate an overtly anti-Semitic worldview or promote the murder of Europe's Jews – this idea is embedded in the simple absence of non-Aryan faces in Riefenstahl's images of Germany's present and future.

Riefenstahl's second major propaganda effort, *Olympia*, was filmed during the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics and released in 1938. *Olympia* idealizes the human form, equating athletic prowess with the Nazi party's leadership of Germany. After the war, Riefenstahl attempted to distance herself from the Nazi party, and was jailed for the span of four separate denazification hearings, which released her without punishment because she was deemed a "sympathizer," but not an explicit "collaborator." For the rest of her life, she attempted to repudiate her past without apologizing for it, and found herself reviled around the world for putting her considerable directing talent in service of Hitler and Nazism.

Another notable Nazi propaganda film that survived the war is Fritz Hippler's *The Eternal Jew*. Released in 1940, the film built upon a massive 1937 anti-Semitic exhibit in Munich with the same title. Directed by Fritz Hippler, a high-ranking officer in Goebbels' propaganda ministry, and supervised by Goebbels, himself, *The Eternal Jew* combines staged sequences with existing footage to viciously caricature European Jewry as "sub-humans" infiltrating German society. For example, the film uses footage of Peter Lorre (an Austrian-Jewish actor who escaped to the US in the early 30's) as a child murderer in Fritz Lang's *M* to imply that Jews have a predilection for murder, never mind that Lorre was famous for his acting and *M* was well known as a work of fiction. The film was well received by the Nazi leadership, and played in theaters throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. Hippler fell out of favor



with Goebbels in 1943 and survived the end of the war to serve two years in Allied prisons for war crimes. He claimed until his death that he was unaware of Nazi genocide and blamed Goebbels for *The Eternal Jew*.

A similar film, *Jew Süß*, was produced in 1940 by the established German director, Veit Harlan. Like Hippler's film, *Jew Süß* adapted a popular novel with the intent of presenting caricature depictions of Jewish characters as documentary truth. Released under the guise of popular entertainment, these two films helped acclimate ordinary Germans to Nazi ideas of Jewish inferiority and Aryan superiority. Although Harlan worked throughout the Nazi years with party leaders on high-profile films, he claimed after the war that he worked unwillingly. Many of his colleagues and former crewmembers publicly disagreed. Although tried several times for war crimes, he was never convicted, and went on to produce several other films in West Germany before his death.

Other Nazi Propaganda

In addition to films that touted domestic social programs and military victories (when the Axis armies stalled and started losing territory to the Allies in 1942 and 1943, the Nazi propaganda machine declared victory, anyway), Nazi propaganda was employed throughout their genocidal campaign against European Jewry. At every turn, the Nazis used disinformation and outright deceit to cover up their apparatus of industrial murder and encourage their victims' compliance.

For example, some concentration and death camp officials compelled recently arriving Jews to send postcards to their relatives that said they were receiving decent treatment. "Deportation to the East for labor" was the common euphemism for those who were sent on trains to their deaths. The infamous sign over the main gate of Auschwitz reads, "Work will make you free," an audacious lie, even by Nazi standards. In 1944, Nazi authorities permitted the International Red Cross to inspect the Theresienstadt Ghetto and adjacent concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Before the inspectors arrived, Nazi propagandists deported large numbers of prisoners to death camps and then systematically cleaned up the area, planting gardens and renovating barracks to make conditions appear humane or even hospitable. The visit by the Red Cross was photographed extensively for a propaganda film, *The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews*, which claimed to document the favorable conditions Europe's Jews enjoyed after their "resettlement." The film was directed by Kurt Gerron, a well-known actor and director, who was sent to die at Auschwitz along with all of the other Jews compelled to participate in the film's production.

Facing imminent defeat in 1945, Nazi authorities went about systematically destroying records of their crimes, including the demolition of concentrations camps and the mass murder center, Treblinka. As part of this cover-up effort, 90% of Nazi film footage was destroyed in the final days of the war. Once Allied units began to liberate concentration camps, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower embedded film crews with them to record the conditions for posterity. These crews shot nearly all of the existent footage of concentration camps and Nazi atrocities, which was used extensively in war crimes trials and in educational newsreels around the world. Famed director, Billy Wilder (who escaped Nazi Germany in 1933), edited some of this footage into documentaries that were shown to German citizens during denazification programs.

American War-Era Propaganda

With a large, outspoken anti-interventionist presence in American government and society opposing military involvement in Europe and the Pacific, the creation of official American war propaganda did not begin until the morning after the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. While the US military began drafting soldiers and mobilizing resources, officials in the Roosevelt administration met with Hollywood studios to seek their support in guiding public opinion towards the war effort. Since many powerful producers, studio chiefs, directors, and actors were Jewish immigrants from Europe, it did not take much convincing (to his credit, Jack Warner had previously pushed his studio, Warner Brothers, to be the first to release films denouncing Nazism: *Black Legion* in 1937 and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1939). Newsreels accompanying feature films soon condemned everything associated with Nazism and Imperial Japan, often employing vivid animated graphics to clearly illustrate the Axis threat. Walt Disney spent considerable time and resources on a 1943 feature length documentary, *Victory Through Air Power*, which uses animation and live action to advocate for the expansion of the American Air Force on both the European and Pacific fronts. Frank Capra, the Oscar-winning director famous for *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) joined the Army and directed the seven-part documentary series, *Why We Fight* (co-directed by Anatole Litvak), which recaps the rise of Nazism and Imperial Japan while making a compelling case for their defeat. The film series was primarily intended to educate newly recruited soldiers about the background of the conflict, but it also played widely to civilian audiences across the US from 1943 to 1945.

From the start of the war, fiction films were also widely used to rally public support. Disney and Warner Brothers employed their iconic animated characters in their wartime

efforts, creating educational films for the military as well as entertaining cartoons for the home front. Movie stars promoted the sale of War Bonds, which helped fund the massive buildup of the American military. Abbott and Costello launched their film careers with *Buck Privates* in 1941 and went on to make a comedy about each branch of the military during the war years. Gary Cooper's Oscar-winning performance in Howard Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941) extolled the heroic virtues of the reluctant soldier and helped build support for American involvement in the war. Feature films also sought to comment on current events. One example is *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), a drama about Army nurses stranded in the Philippines, produced during the years between American withdrawal from the islands in 1942 and their reconquest in 1944.

For decades following World War II, a huge variety of American films were produced about the war years. Ranging from intimate home front dramas to lavish battlefield spectacles and boot camp comedies, these films examined – some more critically than others – the enormous collective experience of the war. Public demand for these films was largely driven by patriotic nostalgia for the victorious narrative, and the government and military tacitly supported the genre to maintain a positive image of the military during the Cold War. In recent years, films about World War II remain popular for their depiction of an era with clear heroes and villains. One can safely expect no shortage of war films in the decades to come, as new social and political contexts demand a reexamination of the older narratives.



Discussion Questions

1. Can propaganda ever be a good thing? If so, what is the social value of a government selling its philosophy and agenda to its citizens?
2. Is it more important for a reporter to be “unbiased” or for you, the viewer/reader to be constantly critical of the information you are given?
3. Is it possible to be an unbiased witness? Specifically, could you report on a war or conflict zone without being affected by what you see? And do you believe that someone (like Riefenstahl, Hippler, or Harlan) aligned with those responsible for crimes against humanity could photograph the victims without bias?

Additional Reading on Propaganda:

Luckert, Steven and Susan Bachrach. *State of Deception the Power of Nazi Propaganda*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2009

Additional Films:

Harlan: In the Shadow of the Jew Suss

2008; Felix Moeller, director; a documentary about the descendants of Veit Harlan and their attempts to reconcile or avoid his legacy

Protocols of Zion

2005; Marc Levin, director; a documentary that explores the continued, unwelcome relevance of the infamous anti-Semitic text

Judgment at Nuremberg

1961; Stanley Kramer, director; a Hollywood dramatization of war crimes trials that includes some of the footage shot at liberated concentration camps

Walt Disney Treasures – On the Front Lines

This DVD set, released in 2004, includes *Victory Through Air Power* and many of the cartoons and educational films Disney Studios created for the American war effort

To Be or Not to Be

1942; Ernst Lubitsch, director; this comedy about a troupe of actors drawn into the Polish underground resistance satirizes callous, inept Nazis as well as self-obsessed actors

The Great Dictator

1940; Charles Chaplin, director/writer; this comedy (Chaplin’s first all-talking film) satirizes Hitler and fascism while advocating for Jewish resistance

You Nazty Spy! / I’ll Never Heil Again

1940/1941; Jules White, director; The Three Stooges satirize Nazism and the military-industrial complex in these two short films, both released before the US entered the war

The Film

A Film Unfinished begins with reels of footage shot by Nazi propagandists in the Warsaw Ghetto during the spring of 1942. The film was partially edited during the war years, and in 1954, the 60-minute film was discovered in East German archives labeled, “Ghetto.” No documentation exists to precisely explain the Nazis’ intended use of the footage. Accounts of its production survive in the diaries of Judenrat (Ghetto Council) chairman, Adam Czerniakow, and other Warsaw Ghetto diaries and archives. The cameramen responsible for the footage are unidentified, except for one: Willy Wist, who was discovered in the 1960’s by a German researcher who happened to notice Wist’s name on a permit for entry into the Ghetto, dated May of 1942. He is identified as a “cameraman.” Excerpts from his testimony in a 1970 war crimes trial are read in the documentary.

Starting in the 1960’s, footage from “Ghetto” was widely used in documentaries about the Holocaust and viewed as a primary historic document. In 1998, the discovery of two film cans containing 30 minutes of outtakes from the production of “Ghetto” revealed a startling truth: that many of the scenes presented in the film as documented reality were, in fact, staged with the unwilling participation of Jewish prisoners in the Ghetto. With this new context, *A Film Unfinished* explores the veracity of the “Ghetto” footage and questions assumptions about it that have developed over decades of use and misuse.

Before screening *A Film Unfinished*, consider alerting students to watch for:

- Differences between how things appear in the footage and how they are described in the narration
- The addition of sound effects and narration to the silent footage
- Evidence that footage might be staged or happening naturally
- Different ways people in the Warsaw Ghetto react to the presence of cameras

Sources for this Study Guide

US Holocaust Memorial Museum – www.ushmm.org
Yad Vashem – www.yadvashem.org

Study guide prepared exclusively for Oscilloscope Laboratories by educator and filmmaker Stuart Weinstock (Columbia University BA, MFA).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important that all written accounts in the film (Adam Czerniakow, Willy Wist, and others) are read in their original languages? And does it matter that the film’s narration is read in accented English?
2. With so much emphasis on the “authenticity” of original footage and realism of language, what does Hersonski’s decision to reenact Willy Wist’s testimony with an actor mean to you? Why do you think she chose to do this, while other testimonies/diaries are read in voiceover narration?
3. Do you believe Willy Wist when he says he did not know the Nazis’ intentions for the people in the Warsaw Ghetto? Although he says he was affected by what he saw, do you believe he was willing or able to empathize with the people he was photographing?
4. Why is it important to see the Holocaust survivors reacting to the footage? What is the value of seeing them cover their eyes in response to the images of the cemetery and mass graves?
5. The documentary’s narration states it is impossible to know the exact purpose of the film, “Ghetto.” Based on the footage you have seen, what do you think the Nazis’ intentions were for the film? (Consider the footage of the mass graves as well as the staged footage of people enjoying big meals, theater performances, etc.)
6. Much of the “Ghetto” film appears slowed down in *A Film Unfinished*. Assuming it was originally shot at normal speed – and this is a fair assumption to make, based on the camera technology of the period – why do you think Hersonski chooses to present it in this way? Can you identify an overall agenda in the way she uses the Nazis’ footage?