The Emotional Impact of the Broadcast of *Holocaust,* an American TV Miniseries, in the Federal Republic (1979)

Abstract

The Jewish historian Julius H. Schoeps describes the emotional outpouring prompted by the broadcast of the American miniseries *Holocaust*, which forced German audiences to confront the human dimension of the Nazis' mass murder. The film dramatized the fate of Dr. Josef Weiss and in doing so, heightened the sympathy for Hitler's victims.

Source

Fear of the Past?
Notes on the Reaction to "Holocaust"

No one had expected this kind of reaction to *Holocaust.* The fact that a commercial television movie made for American audiences managed to stir the feelings of the population of the Federal Republic is a sensation of the first order. Before it was broadcast, officials at WDR [West German Broadcasting] assumed that a few telephone calls would come in but felt that the number of calls would not exceed the usual level (the film was followed by a call-in forum). Members of the editorial panel, whose job it was to evaluate incoming calls for the follow-up discussion, also believed, even shortly before the broadcast, that things would go no worse than usual and that they had some relatively calm evenings in front of them. […]

Several hours before the broadcast began, the first callers started checking in, complaining that the film was being shown in Germany at all. The slant was clearly negative. The weeks of cheap propaganda against the film, the charge of trivialization, and the allegations of a lack of authenticity and credibility were reflected in the opinions of the callers, who criticized the film without having seen it. After about the first half-hour of the movie, the trend changed. The film was having an effect. The calls, which were registered on large index cards by telephone operators, showed that viewers were increasingly taking an interest in the fate of the family of the Jewish doctor Josef Weiss.

Anyone who took note of the initial telephone response to the film was left with the surprising impression that, until that time, there had been no sustained discussion in the Federal Republic of the Nazi past. To denote the trend of the calls, I wrote on a slip of paper: "Strong emotionality—increasing." Most calls revolved around the concepts of "forgetting," "guilt," and "how could it have come to that?" I could not help feeling that many callers felt the need to talk with someone to let out their feelings of sadness, consternation, and shame. When I asked some of the young people who were busy answering the constant stream of calls for their first impressions, they said they had never experienced anything like it. They almost had the feeling they were offering "spiritual counseling." […]

Antisemitic statements that came in through the lines were given special attention by the editorial staff. This was not always easy, since it was often the case that anti-Jewish reservations were not expressed directly, but rather in a veiled fashion. The statements were very diverse. One viewer might complain about the "pro-Jewish tendencies" of the film, or another might say that Jews had financed the film, Jews had produced the film, and Jews had made sure that the film would be broadcast in the Federal Republic in order to hurt the image of Germans throughout the world. One viewer asked, "When will the harassment finally end?" Some calls were much more explicit: "The brood of Jews should finally be

forgotten." Or "Auschwitz existed and was necessary. . . ." There were callers who explained that Hitler and Heydrich were actually Jews. What quietly stood behind such statements was the absurd notion that the Jews themselves were responsible for their own annihilation. It was revealing that most of these calls were anonymous, that is, the callers were not willing to provide any personal information when asked. One of the statements ("all the Jews should have been killed") was cited by the show's moderator in the subsequent discussion. For days, people continued to call in, saying that they could not believe that someone could have said something like that in 1979. It was apparent, however, that the number of statements characterized as "antisemitic" decreased from one segment of the mini-series to the next. Many callers had difficulty dealing with the term "Jew" at all. Callers often asked: "What is a Jew?", "Where does antisemitism come from?" or "Why were the Jews persecuted?"

Over the course of the four evenings on which *Holocaust* was broadcast, there were more and more voices who claimed not to have seen, heard, or known anything. Some were ashamed, blamed themselves, some cried. […] The strong emotional feelings, the obvious emotional burden that many viewers felt, found an outlet in the calls […].

It was astounding that a large part of the *Holocaust* viewing audience did not turn off their televisions after the film but continued watching (on four evenings until midnight). The number of calls did not decrease, even during the subsequent discussion forums. […]

After four evenings in Studio E of WDR, after roughly 10,000 incoming telephone calls, I had the feeling—and I still do—that something was set in motion. For many people in the Federal Republic, *Holocaust* was an emotional introduction, the first encounter with the almost incomprehensible horrors of the Nazi regime. More than a few became aware for the first time that they had repressed the murder of the Jews that was committed in the name of the German people and had previously avoided dealing with the past. Did the Hollywood film *Holocaust* signal a turning point in these attitudes? Only the future will tell.

Source: Julius H. Schoeps, "Angst vor der Vergangenheit? Notizen zu den Reaktionen auf 'Holocaust'"; reprinted in Peter Märtesheimer and Ivo Frenzel, eds., *Im Kreuzfeuer. Der Fernsehfilm 'Holocaust.' Eine Nation ist betroffen.* Frankfurt am Main, 1979, pp. 325–27. Republished with author permission.

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Recommended Citation: The Emotional Impact of the Broadcast of Holocaust, an American TV Miniseries, in the Federal Republic (1979), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1155> [October 12, 2024].