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Transatlantic Broadcasts: Holocaust in America and West Germany

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TRANSATLANTIC BROADCASTS

HOLOCAUST IN AMERICA AND WEST GERMANY

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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of one week in April, 1978, the American broadcaster NBC televised the five-part nine-and-a-half hour miniseries *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss*. The miniseries attempted to narrate the story of the Holocaust in its entirety through the eyes of two families: the bourgeois, German-Jewish Weiss family, and the ethnically German Dorf family, whose father is a leading member of the SS and an architect of the “Final Solution.” Screenwriter Gerald Green employed the two families and the variety of characters whom they encounter to tell a wide-ranging narrative that touched upon nearly all major events and historical figures of the Holocaust – from *Kristallnacht*, to euthanasia, to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and finally to mass murder at Auschwitz. The series featured an array of actors on their way to fame: James Woods as Karl Weiss, Meryl Streep as his ethnically German wife Inga, and Michael Moriarty as the bureaucrat and later SS officer Erik Dorf.

Holocaust differed greatly from the newsreels of the immediate post-war period, which most audiences saw in movie theaters and through the distancing lens of black and white photography, as well as later films, which avoided direct representations of the more horrible aspects of the Holocaust. Instead, *Holocaust* brought a modicum of often harsh realism (tonally, if not always historically) into the intimate setting of the home. Furthermore, in a break with previous representations of the Holocaust, it focused primarily on Jewish victimhood and the “Final Solution.”

The American broadcast of *Holocaust* reached approximately 120 million viewers, or roughly half of the nation’s population; created a media-controversy about representations of the Holocaust in the context of commercial television; galvanized public interest; and directly preceded, and may have encouraged, the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Commission, which later led to the founding of the United States Holocaust Me-

morial Museum.

Noting the major success of *Holocaust* in America, West German television purchased the miniseries on April 28, 1978. This acquisition was not without controversy, primarily due to the American authorship of the film, and the commercial nature of the NBC miniseries.¹ By January 1979, *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR) had broadcast the series in the Federal Republic (FRG) to an audience of 20 million, roughly one-third of the West German population, and one-half of the adult population.² Much like the American broadcast, the West German broadcast received extensive media coverage, increased public interest in the Holocaust, and preceded the political debate about the statute of limitations for war crimes, which threatened to end all trials of Nazi war criminals in December of 1979.

Although the American and West German relationships to the Holocaust vary greatly, these two countries prove particularly apt for a comparison of the effects of *Holocaust*. For one, similarities in the states of Holocaust remembrance in 1978/79 in the United States and the Federal Republic allow comparisons by providing a contextual common ground. Through a comparison of methods of presentations by broadcasters, responses from the media, effects on the public, and broader implications in the political sphere, it becomes clear that though America and Germany displayed striking similarities in the breadth of response, Germany's role in the Holocaust forced a greater depth and intensity of response in the FRG. Furthermore, America's emotional and geographic distance from the Holocaust allowed a greater degree of debate about artistic representations of the Holocaust, rather than the event itself. Through this comparison, the decisive importance of identity in the process and ritual of Holocaust remembrance comes to the fore, whether that identity (be it experienced or inherited) is victim, perpetrator, or neutral bystander.

HOLOCAUST IN CONTEXT: STATES OF MEMORY IN 1978/79 IN AMERICA AND WEST GERMANY

In order to understand the importance of *Holocaust* in both the United States and the Federal Republic, one must first assess the state of Holocaust remembrance and the role of television in both countries at the end of the 1970s. On balance, both countries, following longer periods of silence, had begun a process of renewal that allowed for the production and broadcast of *Holocaust*, but in which *Holocaust* remained a catalyzing agent due to its use

of new forms of representation and the vast audience it received.

By the late 1970s, both cultural and political events had primed memory culture in the United States for *Holocaust*, among Jews and non-Jews alike. American Jews, in particular, had begun a process of rediscovering the Holocaust as a focal point for American-Jewish memory and identity. As Holocaust survivors entered middle age, they began a renewed process of self-discovery in part driven by their American progeny.³ This shift marked a key departure from the earlier relationship between Jewish-Americans and the Holocaust, a relationship once characterized by silence. In the postwar period, the pressure of assimilation into American society had pushed the Holocaust and the notion of Jewish victimhood into the background of Jewish-American consciousness.⁴ Political events also catalyzed an increased drive to commemorate the Holocaust among American Jews. The 1967 Six Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the 1976 Entebbe Operation, in which the Israeli Defense Forces rescued Israeli hostages from a hijacked Air France plane in Uganda, awakened fears among Jewish-Americans of a new “Holocaust” in Israel.⁵ *Holocaust*, which focused almost exclusively on Jewish victimhood, therefore arrived at a high point of Holocaust remembrance in the Jewish-American community.

Political events and pop culture had also increasingly prepared American non-Jews for *Holocaust*. In 1977, the National Socialist Party of America had planned to march in Skokie, Illinois, a town with a large Jewish and Holocaust survivor population. The well-publicized court battle between the town’s government, which sought to ban the march, and the American Civil Liberties Union, which defended the civil rights of the party, effectively brought the Holocaust back onto the front pages of American newspapers and American public consciousness from mid-1977 to early 1978.^{6,7} A similar uptick took place simultaneously in representations of the Holocaust in American culture. Films like *Voyage of the Damned* (1976) and *Julia* (1977) focused for the first time primarily on Jewish suffering in the Holocaust and won significant critical acclaim.⁸ These cultural and political events had thus already brought at least the notion of Holocaust remembrance to American non-Jews by the time of broadcast.

A miniseries totally unrelated to the Holocaust enabled the lengthy narrative representation of the Holocaust with an emphasis on Jewish victimhood. The 1977 ABC television miniseries *Roots*, which chronicles one family’s journey through slavery beginning in Africa and ending in Civil War-era United States, introduced America to the docudrama format with

highly socially conscious and ethnocentric content. At the time of its broadcast, each of the seven episodes of *Roots* landed in the top fifteen television programs of all time, ranked by audience size, despite the fact that the film followed a primarily African-American perspective.⁹ America's television broadcasters observed that the success of the mainstream and commercial *Roots* indicated that *Holocaust* could center on primarily Jewish victimhood and yet still reach a largely non-Jewish audience.¹⁰ Furthermore, it allowed for the depiction of horror and tragedy in the context of commercial television – though the commercial aspect of *Holocaust*'s broadcast later elicited major criticisms from the media and public.

By 1979, West Germany had also begun a process of renewed examination of the Nazi past, following long periods of silence, suppression, and taboo. Although these trends of repression in Germany continued after 1979, a cultural shift preceded and enabled the broadcast of *Holocaust* and emphasized its relevance. Much like the American culture of Holocaust remembrance, the German *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of memory) developed as a result of external events (e.g. the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961) and internal changes (e.g. the development of the student protest movement in the late 1960s). Memory in the Federal Republic also began with a thorough suppression of Holocaust remembrance, empty acknowledgments of guilt, amnesty for many former National Socialists, and an emphasis on German victimhood (roughly 1945 to 1960).¹¹ The highly televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, the parliamentary debate in 1965 on the continuance of legal prosecutions of German war criminals, also known as the *Verjährungsdebatte* (debate on the statute of limitations for war crimes), and the student movement of 1968 all contributed to a new critical examination of the Nazi past in West Germany. Simultaneously, "Auschwitz" became codified as synonymous with German guilt. Over the course of the 1970s, domestic events in the Federal Republic, such as the rise of the left-wing terrorist group *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF) in 1977, pushed direct references to National Socialism and the Holocaust to the periphery, but the use of "Holocaust" and "Third Reich" as points of reference in public and political discourse continued unabated, often in connection with these events.¹² Nevertheless, while politics and generational shifts brought National Socialism back into public discourse, the emphasis remained on German perpetrators and not victims.¹³ The so-called "Hitler-wave" of the late 1970s, a greatly renewed obsession with films and books about the Third Reich and artifacts from the period, typified this perpetrator-centric *Erinnerungskul-*

tur.¹⁴ In this regard, West German memory culture, much like its American counterpart, had prepared itself for *Holocaust*, even as the film's content remained novel in the German context.

Television programming in West Germany provides both a glimpse into the cultural state of remembrance in 1979, as well as a major point of contrast with the American broadcast. Wulf Kansteiner has identified three primary types of programming related to the Holocaust from the 1950s up through 1977: artificially philosemitic documentaries, films imported from Eastern Europe about survival, and films about the rescue of Jewish victims.¹⁵ These films highlighted German victimhood, the notion of resistance, and continued survival, while ignoring many of the awful realities of the Holocaust. *Holocaust* thus did not directly break these trends in West German filmmaking; however, it did significantly expand on a nascent genre of victim-oriented Holocaust programming. This shift in programming trends parallels to a great degree the shifts in American programming embodied by *Roots*, as well as films directly addressing the Holocaust.

Understanding the broadcast of *Holocaust* in Germany also requires an explanation of the West German television landscape, which differed greatly from American commercial television and which significantly affects further comparisons between the two broadcasts. Commercial television did not exist in West Germany until 1984, five years after the initial broadcast of *Holocaust*.¹⁶ In its place was public television, which consisted of three channels, each geared to a different audience. The "Third Channel," also known as WDR, broadcasted "special" and long-form programming, and was responsible for the broadcast of *Holocaust* in January 1979.¹⁷ The absence of commercial television had two major consequences for the German broadcast of *Holocaust*. Firstly, public television rendered criticism of commercialism moot in the German context, allowing the German media to debate other aspects of the film. Secondly, and crucially, the decision to broadcast *Holocaust* was inherently political because German television survived on public funding. Although these two points of contrast do not render a comparison of the American and German broadcasts impossible, it is important to keep in mind the repercussions of broadcasting *Holocaust* on public television.

Despite the vast geographic and emotional differences between the cultures of Holocaust remembrance in the United States and the Federal Republic, they resemble one another to a remarkable degree around 1978/79. By the time of the broadcast of *Holocaust* both nations had begun a renaiss-

sance of open discourse about the Holocaust in political and cultural forums. This striking parallelism speaks greatly to the function of memory for victims, perpetrators, and the many neutral actors of the United States: the urge to forget is sometimes universal. However, this parallelism speaks more to the Federal Republic's avoidance of its past, and general trends in Holocaust remembrance, which appears to develop in waves. In effect, the Federal Republic, the land of the perpetrators, took as long as the United States, a country with a very small portion of people who had experienced the Holocaust in any concrete way, to develop a serious interest in the Holocaust.

PRESENTING *HOLOCAUST* IN AMERICA AND WEST GERMANY

By 1978/79, political and cultural events had created a climate in which a major TV network could produce a nine-and-a-half hour miniseries primarily about Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, and which nearly one-half of all Americans and one-third of all West Germans took the time to watch. For their parts, however, both American and West German broadcasters attempted to make *Holocaust* an event, pushing the effects of the miniseries beyond the confines of television and into public education. The difference between NBC's efforts versus those of *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* was the timing of much of the non-broadcast activities. While NBC made great efforts prior to the broadcast of *Holocaust*, likely attempting to drum up viewership, WDR provided forums after the broadcast to answer questions viewers might have about the miniseries or the Holocaust and National Socialism in general. As a result, West German audiences, though slightly smaller, received a more in-depth and historically grounded picture of the events portrayed on-screen.

NBC's efforts in presenting *Holocaust* as an event included extensive advertising, educational guides, novelizations, cooperation with Jewish as well as Christian religious groups, and special timing to coincide with events of the Holocaust as well as the Jewish calendar. The clearest sign of NBC's commitment to bringing *Holocaust* to as large an audience as possible was its advertising campaign. In 1978, the network aired more commercials for *Holocaust* than it had for any other single program.¹⁸ Furthermore, as part of its educational approach, NBC published one million study guides for distribution by teachers' organizations and Jewish and Christian organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the National Council of Churches.¹⁹ Additionally, Gerald Green, the film's screenwriter,

wrote a novelized version of the film of which Bantam Books published one million copies two weeks prior to the broadcast.²⁰ NBC also declared the first day of the broadcast, Sunday, April 16, to be “Holocaust Sunday” to usher in a week of “thought and reflection.”²¹ The timing of the broadcast also echoed the centrality of Jewish victimhood in the film by coinciding with the Jewish calendar: NBC aired *Holocaust* the week before Passover and the final episode coincided with the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.²² The considerable amount of resources and thought NBC poured into the broadcast of *Holocaust* is not only astounding from a modern perspective, it was also remarkably effective in attracting viewers.

Like NBC, WDR began preparations for the broadcast of *Holocaust* with more in mind than the television programming itself. When West German television officials negotiated for broadcasting rights to *Holocaust*, they consciously emphasized the cultural and educational importance of the miniseries. Jochen Stinauer, who negotiated the film’s purchase, maintained that officials were “conscious of the importance of ‘Holocaust’ and of the value it can have for the German people.”²³ This sense of responsibility to the material pervaded the West German presentation of the miniseries. In the same mold as American study guides, 25,000 study guides were published in the Federal Republic prior to the broadcast, though post-broadcast orders in the amount of 255,000 quickly overwhelmed publishers.²⁴ In addition to study guides, WDR tried, and was largely successful, in balancing the fictionalized story with the work done by historians. Federal and local government agencies involved in education also held seminars and distributed additional material to cover aspects of the Holocaust not shown in the miniseries.²⁵ For example, two fact-based documentaries on the “Final Solution” accompanied the initial broadcast on WDR.²⁶ Furthermore, following each episode, the WDR hosted *Midnight Discussions*, a kind of forum for viewers to interact with survivors, sociologists, historians, and psychologists, ask questions, and make comments about each night’s episode.²⁷ In total, approximately 35,000 West German viewers, or roughly four times the number of callers to U.S. television stations, took up the WDR’s offer and called in during the post-show broadcasts.²⁸ Even viewers who did not call in benefited from the programming: around half of the public that watched each episode, or about ten million viewers, stayed up to watch *Midnight Discussions*.²⁹

In comparison to NBC’s massive effort to expand viewership, the resources used by WDR appear rather minimal. However, despite the relative

lack of breadth in WDR's presentation of *Holocaust*, the level of depth and in particular the encouragement of active viewer participation following each broadcast allowed for a greater degree of self-reflection. The West German context, in which many viewers had either direct or indirect connections to National Socialism via friends and family members, likely necessitated this communal self-reflection and precipitated the high level of viewer participation. Nevertheless, the American presentation, which commercial considerations largely fueled, likely could have reached a similarly large audience with post-broadcast programming. As it turned out, American viewers still sought forums for public debate, but through other media.

HOLOCAUST IN AMERICAN AND WEST GERMAN MEDIA

In the week of the broadcast and even in its aftermath, the media of both the United States and the Federal Republic provided key forums for public discussion and directed debate about the miniseries, both as a work of art and as an educational tool. The *ways* in which the American media and German media differed in their direction of debate especially highlight the particularities of Holocaust remembrance in each country. While almost academic debates about aestheticizing and trivializing the Holocaust raged in American newspapers, West German newspapers reacted in generally more positive ways to the broadcast, not because of the film's aesthetic worth, but because of its role as a catalyst for Holocaust remembrance. Above all, this disparity in media responses reflects the greater inherent meaning of Holocaust remembrance as an *end* in West Germany, while the American media treated Holocaust remembrance as a *means*, a vehicle for teaching universal lessons.

In the American media, critical responses to *Holocaust* were divided essentially into two camps. The first camp, best represented by Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and author of the acclaimed memoir *Night*, as well as a small group of television critics, criticized the film for poor artistic quality, lack of sensitivity, and crass commercialism. Elie Wiesel took the first major shot at *Holocaust*, and his words took on greater meaning given his personal experience in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald, as well as his public role in shaping the American discourse on the Holocaust. In his critique of *Holocaust*, which appeared on the first day of the American broadcast, Wiesel called the miniseries "untrue, offensive, [and] cheap," lamenting its lack of historical authenticity, unfaithfulness to those involved, and its

doomed attempt to portray the unportrayable.³⁰ John O'Connor, the regular TV critic for *The New York Times*, echoed Wiesel's critiques while raising yet another: he claimed the mixture of commercial breaks with historical tragedy inherently causes a "process of diminishment."³¹ These critics of *Holocaust* justifiably found much to fault in the melodrama, the compromises of historical fact, and commercialism of broadcast. In their minds, these faults alone preclude *Holocaust* from functioning as an effective or beneficial teaching tool, despite the clear mass commercial success of the broadcast.

The second camp, which *Time* columnist Frank Rich best represented, defended the film for its utility as a teaching tool. In this view, the artistic deficiencies and inherent commercialism of the film were simply lesser evils in the face of the vast audience *Holocaust* reached, who otherwise would never have had significant knowledge of the event. Rich wrote in *Time*:

[N]o TV show or movie, including this one, can make an audience feel what it was like to be a Jew caught in the Holocaust: only those who were there can ever know. But *Holocaust* does a lot to increase our comprehension of its unfathomable subject...*Holocaust* attaches human faces to the inhuman statistics of mass murder. It envelops the audience in grief and suffering, and long after the show has ended, the pain does not easily go away.³²

Like Rich, those critics who came out in support of *Holocaust* tempered their praise with statements about the inability to portray truthfully the horror and tragedy of the Holocaust within the limitations of television. Nevertheless, they all saw the benefits of reaching a mass audience and encouraging self-driven research on the Holocaust.

The critical debate surrounding *Holocaust* lasted in America through May 1978, and was itself a landmark in America's culture of Holocaust remembrance. The very fact that a major newspaper like *The New York Times* dedicated significant coverage to the subject of the Holocaust, whether Elie Wiesel's critique, Gerald Green's rebuttal, or the many letters to the editor published in a special section, indicates the public's interest in the continuing debate, and the media's receptiveness to a continued discourse on the Holocaust.³³ The *Los Angeles Times* even published an article about the lessons of the Holocaust on the human condition, questioning whether Amer-

icans could have been guards at the death camps.³⁴ Although such articles necessarily engage in a process of universalization, they do indicate that the media had a clear interest in exploring the Holocaust further. Whether or not *Holocaust* succeeded as a work of art, it successfully created a lively discourse in the media about Holocaust representation, Holocaust memory, and the lessons the Holocaust might have for today.

Unlike the American media, which extensively debated the aesthetic and educational worth of *Holocaust*, the West German media focused primarily on the effects of the miniseries on the public and its meaning for continued Holocaust remembrance. However, the media, though difficult to characterize as a single entity, did not generally begin with an eye to the historical and political implications of *Holocaust*, instead characterizing the miniseries prior to its broadcast as overly commercial, aesthetically questionable, a trivialization, and a kind of American intrusion into a German, or at least European, matter. Nevertheless, while some in the media criticized the miniseries directly, many used American critiques such as Elie Wiesel's as a kind of proxy, or muted their criticisms.³⁵

Many of the criticisms during the heavy pre-broadcast media coverage gave way to highly positive post-broadcast reactions on the educational and political utility of the miniseries. The development from harsh critique to almost wholesale acceptance is best illustrated by *Der Spiegel*. The West German newsweekly published several highly critical articles prior to the West German broadcast, one with the sardonic title "Gas Chambers à la Hollywood."³⁶ Immediately after the broadcast of *Holocaust*, *Der Spiegel* published a cover story about the miniseries entitled "'Holocaust': The Past Returns," and subtitled the "Murder of the Jews Moves the Germans."³⁷ Across the board, German media spoke of how *Holocaust* "broke through thirty years of apathy"³⁸; brought the past to light "more memorably than ever"³⁹; and visualized the "crimes committed in the name of Germany in a way that shook millions."⁴⁰ The criticisms about the poorly executed aestheticization of the film and the commercialism behind the film's production did not wholly disappear, but they did become insignificant in light of the film's impact on German society. Aggregately, of 449 critiques of the miniseries in daily and weekly news-outlets, only 27% received the miniseries negatively, while 16% were ambivalent, and 57% overtly positive.⁴¹ Although the majority of positive reviews was hardly overwhelming, the small minority of negative reviews indicates the level of trepidation with which West German media approached the strong public responses, and the impli-

cations thereof. Perhaps more significant was the continued coverage of the Holocaust in the press, in articles about the death camps and the German role therein, for example.⁴² The renewed impulse of Holocaust remembrance in the media of the Federal Republic, spurred by the film, continued for the next several months.⁴³

When compared with one another, American and German media responses put in stark relief the themes in each nation's Holocaust remembrance. While American media focused on almost academic subjects like the aestheticization and trivialization of the Holocaust and the lessons that one might draw from the Holocaust for an American context, the German media faced the task of bringing the Holocaust to a population in a sense duty bound to Holocaust remembrance. In Germany, the stakes were higher and the themes less abstract, while American media had the luxury of flexibility in the absence of historical obligation. Furthermore, universalization and "lessons" of the Holocaust achieved greater importance in America, a country where connections to the Holocaust are indirect and often tenuous.

PUBLIC REACTIONS TO *HOLOCAUST* IN AMERICA AND WEST GERMANY

Reactions to *Holocaust* by audiences at large in the U.S. and the FRG resemble one another greatly in breadth, but to a lesser degree in depth. Much as with the media, however, American viewers disagreed as to the aesthetic and educational worth of the miniseries, while West German viewers overwhelmingly supported the miniseries for its historical and educational implications, with a small minority of negative opinions responding with anti-Semitism or open calls to repress the Nazi past.

The American public reacted in a variety of ways towards the broadcast of *Holocaust* in 1978, reflecting the broad cross-section of the American public that the miniseries reached and often emotionally moved. American viewers often entered into a well-informed dialogue with newspapers, conducting debates with television and cultural critics through letters to the editor. Letters to American newspapers, written both by Jews and non-Jews, provide an effective entrée into the quality of public responses, and those that appeared in the American press in late April and early May do effectively indicate that the miniseries became a phenomenon beyond the bounds of television. Letters to the editor in *The New York Times* often debated Elie Wiesel's review and Gerald Green's response, or noted the lessons drawn from the miniseries and its resulting controversy. One respondent wrote that

“the series... opened up on a broad front the entire racist issue and its meaning to us today.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, one letter praised NBC for having “the courage to stir up this controversy” despite the faults of the miniseries.⁴⁵ In one representative letter, a Jewish-American viewer mentioned how her nine-year-old son could not watch more than one episode due to its horror, but “he will never again forget the Holocaust.”⁴⁶ A strong thread of emotionality runs through the letters, regardless of their stance on *Holocaust*. More than any other source, these letters show that the Holocaust, the event, or *Holocaust*, the television broadcast, had emotional resonance with an American audience despite geographic or ethnic distance from the events.

What letters to the editor can tell us about the tone is echoed in opinion polling data taken in the aftermath of the broadcast. Although it is difficult to gauge accurately the wide berth of responses among American viewers, opinion polls show that the film was primarily effective in reaching a young, Christian audience, which had not previously learned extensively about the Holocaust. In a poll conducted by the American Jewish Committee, 60% of respondents felt that the film helped them better understand Adolf Hitler’s treatment of the Jews, and roughly 75% of respondents said that the film provided “an accurate picture of Nazi anti-Semitic policies.”⁴⁷ The poll also found that nearly half of all viewers still blamed Jewish victims for not resisting enough. Although this response remains puzzling given the prominent presence of Jewish resistance in the film, the statistics indicate that the film had a significant impact on the American public’s understanding of the Holocaust. If nearly half of all Americans viewed an episode of the miniseries, than at least one-third of all Americans appeared to have internalized what they saw portrayed on screen.

Aside from this passive response to *Holocaust*, the miniseries also spurred the public to actively seek out more information about the Holocaust. Following the broadcast, the National Archives in Washington, D.C. responded to a flood of inquiries about the Holocaust by putting on an exhibition of documents related to the planning and execution of the “Final Solution.”⁴⁸ The most lasting and directly measurable impact of *Holocaust* in America’s remembrance of the Holocaust was the creation of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. As journalist Judith Miller has noted, survivors in the Connecticut area were “angered by what they saw as the program’s trivialization of their searing experiences,” and thus were encouraged to have their memories documented.⁴⁹ While *Holocaust* has by and large disappeared from America’s landscape of Holo-

caust remembrance, the effect on this small subsection of the American public continues to affect modern memory in America.

Public responses in West Germany showed a smaller range of opinion, though often a greater depth of emotion and a higher level of active responses, when compared with American responses. In much the same way that American letters to the editor provide a glimpse into the tone of Americans' reactions, the calls to the *Midnight Discussions* show the range of West German responses to *Holocaust*. The first two nights of calls ranged from the deeply emotional calls about personal experiences to factual questions about the depicted events.⁵⁰ The majority of these questions followed four themes: "Why was there no formal resistance?"; "Why didn't the Catholic and Protestant churches do anything?"; "Why didn't the rest of the world intervene?"; and "Why were the Jews so passive?"⁵¹ In the same vein, 450,000 viewers requested written educational material about the Nazi period and the Holocaust from the Federal Center for Political Education.⁵² More than anything else, the range of factual questions and requests for information indicate the desire among the West German population for explanations about the development and implementation of the "Final Solution," which many appeared not to have seriously considered or learned about prior to the broadcast of *Holocaust*.

Another set of openly and latently anti-Semitic responses appeared in the wake of *Holocaust*, though significantly fewer in number than the positive responses. Oftentimes these commentators tried to draw up a balance sheet of victimhood: they complained about the lack of films concerning the 1945 firebombing of Dresden, the fate of many German POWs in Soviet prison camps, or the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe following the war.⁵³ Anti-Semitic, far-right statements and motions to suppress Holocaust remembrance show an aspect of West German response not seen, or at least not reported, in the American context, most likely due to the vestiges of National Socialism and the difficult process of admitting guilt, whether individual or collective.

Post-broadcast polling data are particularly instructive for understanding the quantity of West German responses. Opinion polls found that two-thirds of all viewers said the miniseries had "deeply moved" them.⁵⁴ More than one-third of all viewers were appalled that "we Germans committed and tolerated such crimes." Finally, one-fifth of all viewers claimed to have nearly cried during certain scenes. Of those polled who did not watch *Holocaust*, 33% claimed that the miniseries would have been too emotionally affect-

ing; 28% could not watch the miniseries for unstated reasons; 18% were not interested in the subject; 22% failed to watch because “one should finally forget such things”; and 8% because “we don’t have anything to do with [the Nazi past] anymore.” When *Holocaust* connected with West German viewers, it made a lasting impact, inciting active responses. The minority of viewers who actively refused to watch *Holocaust*, who did not undergo a change of heart, or who watched *Holocaust* already holding anti-Semitic or far-right attitudes likely hardened their opinions.

The most noteworthy aspect of West German responses was the level of emotion. In several cases, it was as though West German viewers had never seen depictions of the “Final Solution” before. Many Americans expressed their reactions to *Holocaust* in highly emotional ways, but West Germans reacted generally in more active and historically conscious ways – whether calling into the *Midnight Discussions* or requesting material from the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Center for Political Education). This reflects on the one hand the opportunities for active participation offered in West Germany that Americans simply lacked, and on the other hand the pressure of identity and “collective guilt.” For the survivors in America who founded the Fortunoff archive, *Holocaust* was a call to action. Similarly, for many West Germans with connections to the Holocaust, the film catalyzed a great degree of self-reflection. Among the Americans with more tenuous bonds to the Holocaust or none at all, the lack of non-active responses remains unsurprising.

HOLOCAUST AND POLITICS IN AMERICA AND WEST GERMANY

The political repercussions of *Holocaust* in both the United States and the Federal Republic are particularly illustrative because of the potential for direct and visible effects in policy. In both nations, *Holocaust* ushered in and likely influenced, but did not directly catalyze, an era of increased political discourse related to the Holocaust.

While the American media debated the merits of *Holocaust* and the public continued to learn more and more about the event in the aftermath of the broadcast, the miniseries resonated in significant ways with the American political elite. However, while *Holocaust* did become a reference point for political discussions related to genocide and Holocaust remembrance, it did not, in most cases, directly influence political decision-making.

The use of *Holocaust* as a reference point in American politics can be

seen in the stated motivations of American politicians as well as congressional testimony from the post-broadcast period. For example, Senator William Proxmire, a Democrat from Wisconsin, mentioned *Holocaust* in a plea for the United States to ratify the United Nations Genocide Convention.⁵⁵ Similarly, John Danforth, a Republican Senator from Missouri and the first elected official to draft and sponsor a bill for a national day of Holocaust remembrance, stated that the miniseries inspired his congressional proposal.⁵⁶ In congressional testimony about West Germany's response to political terrorism, one expert even referred to *Holocaust* as evidence of the "trauma...the Germans are still coping with."⁵⁷ More than anything else, this use of the miniseries as a point of reference indicates the high level of cultural currency that *Holocaust* had achieved due to NBC's efforts both on and off screen.

Furthermore, the miniseries had transformed the Holocaust into a kind of popular and non-controversial topic politically, despite the controversy regarding the cultural meaning of the miniseries. As Alan Mintz has argued, *Holocaust* the miniseries transformed Holocaust the event into a rare point of moral consensus in American politics – who, after all, would stand in the way of public Holocaust remembrance in the post-broadcast climate?⁵⁸ Nevertheless, this moral consensus did not equate direct political action, which instead resulted due to a number of factors.

The effect of *Holocaust* on American politics is best observed in the formation of the Holocaust Memorial Commission two weeks after the broadcast. In a ceremony in the White House Rose Garden on May 1, 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced the formation of the Holocaust Memorial Commission. This commission would go on to create the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened in 1993 and represented a defining moment in America's remembrance of the Holocaust. Due to the chronologic proximity between the broadcast of *Holocaust* and the creation of the commission, it is easy to draw the conclusion that the NBC docudrama played a significant role in Carter's decision-making process. Nevertheless, the primary motivations that led to the creation of the Holocaust Memorial Commission had much more to do with political and foreign policy considerations. Edward Linenthal, who has closely examined the genesis of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, identifies the primary reasons behind the creation of the commission as Carter's "troubles with the Jewish community" because of his policy regarding Palestine and arms sales to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁹ However, *Holocaust* did provide added incentive for the

Carter administration to form the commission. When Stuart Eizenstat, Carter's Chief of Domestic Policy, recommended the formation of the Holocaust Memorial Commission to the President, he also noted the impact of *Holocaust* on American audiences.⁶⁰ Given the other political factors at work, it is unlikely that *Holocaust* tipped the scales in Carter's decision-making process. Nevertheless, *Holocaust* created an atmosphere beneficial to the work of the commission, ensured the presence of a receptive American audience, and increased the continued viability of the project.

Much like the American initiative to begin the Holocaust Memorial Commission, West German legislators faced an important policy decision related to the Holocaust almost directly after the broadcast of *Holocaust*. And similarly, while *Holocaust* influenced policymakers, it likely did not tip the scales in the decision-making process. Significantly, however, the Holocaust became a major point of reference and a major part of West German memory-politics following the broadcast of the miniseries.

The debate on and ultimate abolition of the statute of limitations of German war crimes, also known as the *Verjährungsdebatte*, provides the major parallel with Carter's executive order to found the Memorial Commission. The implications of this particular legislative battle in the Bundestag, however, go far deeper than the implications of Carter's order. As with the founding of the commission, it is important not to overestimate the effect of *Holocaust* on the *Verjährungsdebatte*. For one, the Bundestag had discussed the statute of limitations on war criminals twice before, in 1965 and 1969, and both times decided to continue prosecutions via legislative compromise.⁶¹ Thus, German lawmakers had already set a legal precedent for treating war criminals with a separate set of judicial tools, and for extending rather than discontinuing prosecutions of war crimes. Furthermore, the United States, Israel, and Poland all exerted pressure on the FRG to eliminate the statute of limitations, and their political demands had already proven decisive in the original debate of 1965.⁶²

Nevertheless, two aspects of the 1979 debate indicate that *Holocaust* did indeed play an important, if not ultimately decisive, role in the decision-making process of the Bundestag. Firstly, the voting patterns of party members indicate individual shifts away from the party line, perhaps as a result of *Holocaust*. The debate ended on July 3, 1979, when the Bundestag voted 253 to 228 to abolish the statute of limitations for crimes of murder and genocide.⁶³ As Jeffrey Herf has noted, the voting patterns of the 1979 debate indicate an actual increase in conservative opposition to ending the statute

of limitations, as most of the voting occurred along party lines – the Social Democrats (SPD) supporting further investigations and the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Free Democrats (FDP) voting to enforce the statute of limitations. However, without the votes of the 38 Christian Democrats who crossed party lines, the SPD would not have successfully won this legislative battle. The extent to which *Holocaust* influenced these members of the Bundestag remains a mystery. Perhaps *Holocaust* created a climate favorable to the further prosecution of war criminals and greater self-reflection on a political level. However, among the speeches available today, none make mention of the docudrama or its effect on public opinion in the Federal Republic.

Secondly, prior to the broadcast of *Holocaust*, West German public opinion was aligned against extending the statute of limitations – most Germans were disinterested, uninformed, or flatly opposed to further prosecutions.⁶⁴ The effects of *Holocaust* on German public opinion as seen in the public reactions likely did not go unnoticed by politicians. For its part, the West German media linked *Holocaust* thematically with the *Verjährungsdebatte*, often publishing articles about the miniseries directly next to articles about the debate.⁶⁵ It is likely that members of the Bundestag, prodded in part by the media, made the same connection between the miniseries, the shift in public opinion, and their own votes.

A much clearer connection can be made between the broadcast of *Holocaust* and the following era of increased historical awareness in West German politics. Drawing from the lessons of *Holocaust*, West German politicians in the early 1980s, and in particular Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a trained historian, began a campaign to address directly issues of German identity in a post-Holocaust nation.⁶⁶ Rather than suppress collective-memory of the National Socialist past, Kohl began a process of creating “post-conventional” German national identity based around public acts of remembrance.⁶⁷ The media controversy and public response to *Holocaust* in 1979 fostered and allowed the kind of political discourse that Kohl would go on to popularize in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Even if *Holocaust* failed to affect legislation directly, the miniseries catalyzed changes to West Germany’s political atmosphere.

Given the more positive media responses and the deeper public responses to *Holocaust* in West Germany than in America, it follows that West German political actors would react more dynamically and in more obvious ways than Americans. In both cases, however, the extent to which *Holocaust* truly

influenced policy remains questionable, if slightly less so in the West German case. The most striking difference between political effects in America and West Germany is the degree to which Holocaust remembrance emerged as a consensus issue. While American politicians began to use the Holocaust as an almost non-political consensus issue, in a way playing the role of hero in the Holocaust narrative, West German politicians had to treat Holocaust remembrance in highly politicized ways due to internal pressures, primarily from the right. As politicians of the United States and Federal Republic set off on a course of memory-minded political decisions, West Germans inherently faced more domestic difficulties in pushing proposals through the government. While the Carter administration ultimately clashed with members of the Holocaust Memorial Commission, the barriers in his way were inherently smaller than those in front of West German politicians. The effects of *Holocaust* then, though comparable, differ greatly once put into each nation's political context.

CONCLUSIONS

From a superficial standpoint, the broadcasts of *Holocaust* in America and Germany would appear inherently and vastly different due to the historical contexts. Most Americans had little to no connection to the Holocaust, and while some American Jews could draw on the Holocaust as a focal point for group identity, only the tiniest minority experienced the Holocaust directly. By contrast, virtually the entirety of West German society had a direct connection to the Third Reich, and thus at least an indirect connection to the Holocaust.

Indeed, the politics of identity informed to an immense degree the reception to the broadcasts of *Holocaust*. Most Americans could debate the appropriateness of the portrayal of the Holocaust because, for many, the event itself appeared as a kind of historically grounded parable, rife with lessons, but from another time and another world. Furthermore, the miniseries provided a point of contrast for American identity and self-definition, which has always been bound up with notions, if not realities, of freedom, democracy, and civil rights. By contrast, the West German relationship to the past was grounded in the collective memory of an event committed by fellow Germans and upon native soil. The reverberations of the Holocaust in public and political discourse shook and shaped West Germany, and continue to today. The more deeply emotional and more active reactions among

West Germans to the broadcast of *Holocaust* are a direct result of this sense of identity and link to the Nazi past.

Nevertheless, similarities in the general contours of response – media controversy, public emotion, political points of reference – indicate two important things. Firstly, the reactions to the broadcast indicate that events in collective memory follow similar patterns, even when the context changes. Secondly, the similarities in the transatlantic impacts of *Holocaust* show that the miniseries itself contained something strikingly new in its depiction of the titular event. The miniseries demonstrated the high degree of social impact television and other media can have in the post-war age, the continually changing landscape of Holocaust memory in response to technological developments, and new horizons of historical depiction. Although dependent on contexts, collective memories, and identity politics, *Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss* itself bears some measure of responsibility for the changes in memory culture it accompanied.

¹ John Vinocur, “Germans Buy TV ‘Holocaust,’” *New York Times*, April 28, 1978, pg. C26.

² Uwe Magnus, “Die Einschaltquoten und Sehbeteiligung,” in *Im Kreuzfeuer: Der Fernsehfilm Holocaust*, ed. Peter Märthesheimer and Ivo Frenzel (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1979), 223.

³ Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 156.

⁴ Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 25; Judith Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 22.

⁵ Doneson, 149.

⁶ Lesley Oelsner, “High Court Upsets a Ban in Illinois On Parade by Nazi-Styled Group,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1977, 20.

⁷ Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 11.

⁸ Doneson, 130-134.

⁹ Stuart H. Surlin, “Race and Authoritarianism: Effect on the Perception of *Roots*,” in *Journal of Black Studies* 12/1 (Sept. 1981): 71.

¹⁰ Leslie Fishbein, “*Roots*: Docudrama and the Interpretation of History,” in *Why Docudrama?*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 279

¹¹ Sandra Schulz, “Film und Fernsehen als Medien der gesellschaftlichen Vergegenwärtigung des Holocaust: Die deutsche Erstaustrahlung der US-Amerikanischen Fernsehserie ‘Holocaust’ im Jahre 1979.” *Historical Social Research* 32 (2007), 202.

¹² Wulf Kansteiner, “Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany.” In, *The Politics of Memory of Postwar Europe*, edited by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner,

and Claudio Fugo (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 121.

¹³ Schulz, 202.

¹⁴ Siegfried Zielinski, "History as Entertainment and Provocation: The TV Series 'Holocaust' in West Germany," in *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980): 86-87.

¹⁵ Wulf Kansteiner, "Entertaining Catastrophe: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic of Germany," *New German Critique* (no. 90, Autumn 2003), 140-141.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 134.

¹⁷ Rebecca S. Hayden and Andrei S. Markovits, "'Holocaust' before and after the Event: Reactions in West Germany and Austria," in *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), 59.

¹⁸ Doneson, 186.

¹⁹ "'Holocaust' Study Aids and Spinoffs," *New York Times* April 14, 1978, C26.

²⁰ Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163.

²¹ Doneson, 188.

²² Shandler, 165.

²³ Quoted in: John Vinocur, "Germans Buy TV 'Holocaust,'" *New York Times*, April 28, 1978, pg. C26.

²⁴ Jeffrey Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), 30.

²⁵ Hayden and Markovits, 61-2.

²⁶ Hayden Markovits, 59.

²⁷ "Anruf erwünscht," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan 22, 1979, 18.

²⁸ Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," 30.

²⁹ "'Holocaust': Die Vergangenheit kommt zurück," *Der Spiegel*, Jan 29, 1979, 19.

³⁰ Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction," *New York Times* April 16, 1978, 75.

³¹ John J. O'Connor, "TV Weekend," *New York Times* April 14, 1978, C26.

³² Frank Rich, "Reliving the Nazi Nightmare," *Time* April 17, 1978.

³³ See: Gerald Green, "In Defense of 'Holocaust,'" *New York Times*, April 23 1978, D1.

³⁴ Paul Galloway, "Could Americans Ever Man Death Camps?," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1978, SD-A11.

³⁵ Hayden and Markovits, 57-8.

³⁶ "Fernsehen: Gaskammern à la Hollywood," *Der Spiegel*, May 15, 1978, 228-231.

³⁷ "'Holocaust': Die Vergangenheit kommt zurück," 17-28.

³⁸ Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, "Eine deutsche Geschichtsstunde," *Die Zeit*, Feb 2, 1979, 1.

³⁹ Joachim Fest, "Nachwort zu Holocaust," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan 29, 1979, 1.

⁴⁰ "'Holocaust': Die Vergangenheit kommt zurück," 17.

⁴¹ Joachim Siedler, *Holocaust: Die Fernsehserie in der deutschen Presse*, (Muenster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 1984), 163.

⁴² "Auschwitz: Eine Generation fragt," *Der Spiegel*, February 5, 1979, 28-34.

⁴³ Michael Allinder and Jean-Paul Bier, "The Holocaust and West Germany: Strategies of Oblivion 1947-1979," *New German Critique* 19 (Winter 1980), 29.

⁴⁴ Joseph Papp, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, April 30, 1978, D29.

⁴⁵ Sandra Tankoos, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, April 30, 1978, D30.

⁴⁶ Judith Lorber, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, April 30, 1978, D30.

- ⁴⁷ Lawrence Baron, *Projecting the Holocaust into the Present*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 54.
- ⁴⁸ Doneson, 191.
- ⁴⁹ Shandler, 176.
- ⁵⁰ Hayden and Markovits, 63.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² "Fernsehen: Nachwirkungen von 'Holocaust,'" *Der Spiegel*, May 5, 1978, 202.
- ⁵³ Hayden and Markovits, 63.
- ⁵⁴ "Fernsehen: Nachwirkungen von 'Holocaust,'" 202.
- ⁵⁵ Shandler, 165.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, 175.
- ⁵⁷ U.S. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. *West Germany's Political Response to Terrorism*. (95th Congress, 2nd Session, April 26, 1978), 12.
- ⁵⁸ Mintz, 26.
- ⁵⁹ Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 18.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 19.
- ⁶¹ For an extensive discussion of the Verjährungsdebatten of the 1960s, see: Marc von Miquel, *Ahnden oder Amnestieren?: Westdeutsche Justiz und Vergangenheitspolitik in den sechziger Jahren*, (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004).
- ⁶² Herf, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," 34.
- ⁶³ Ibid, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 342.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, "The 'Holocaust' Reception in West Germany: Right, Center and Left," 34.
- ⁶⁵ Jens Müller-Bauseneik, "Die US-Fernsehserie 'Holocaust' im Spiegel der deutschen Presse (Januar – März 1979)," *Historical Social Research* (Vol. 30, no. 4, 2005) , 133
- ⁶⁶ Kansteiner, "Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany," 126.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.