

INTRODUCTION

The content of American television is notoriously cautious, even supine. Most programs are low grade fantasy, quiz shows, soap operas, and sports. Innovation is rare. The reason: it is a commercial medium. The three major networks compete brutally for the mass audience. Programs which fail in this objective are rapidly removed from the airwaves. Irrefutably, American television produces the most programs and the greatest percentage of out-right junk.

Then how is it possible to explain the appearance of a program which dramatically portrayed the events of the Holocaust? The explanation is less bizarre than one might conceive. "Roots" and similar shows indicated the existence of a substantial audience for dramatic, novel-based, fiction. The "Roots" example also revealed that scheduling such a mini-series on consecutive nights could reduce possible ratings points losses and exploit rating successes. Furthermore, there exists in the United States a Jewish audience, especially in the major metropolitan areas of New York and Los Angeles so attractive to advertisers. A program devoted to the holocaust would also garner prestige for the network. And the television networks do indeed make periodic bows in the direction of social responsibility and elevated entertainment; it is politic to show the Federal Communications Commission and the American people that the television industry is not entirely mercenary.

It would be unfair to attribute only selfish motives to the people in the producing company and at the National Broadcasting Company who brought "Holocaust" to the television screen. There is a liberal-humanitarian streak pervading the television business - an urge to benefit and educate society. It appears in the periodic public pronouncements of the industry's executives and in the interviews they give to scholars (see the revealing *The Hollywood Television Producers* by Muriel Cantor). Certainly the holocaust would not be controversial in the uncommercial sense of taking a position on a divisive issue: defenders of the holocaust are few in the United States, although there are those who deny that it ever occurred.

A program like "Holocaust" would also be appropriately promoted by socially active and concerned organizations in the United States such as the B'Nai B'rith, The American Jewish Committee, the National Council of Social Studies, and the National Council of Churches. Legitimate, educational promotion, but publicity attracting an audience too.

So the motives behind the television program "Holocaust" were no doubt

a combination of idealism, prestige, and commercialism — the American characteristic that the Tocqueville brilliantly identified 150 years ago as “the principle of interest rightly understood.” But whatever underlay the program, the cost was substantial, some 6 million dollars. With such an outlay, everything had to be done to ensure that the program would attract a significant audience.

This meant, in effect, that risky artistic forms would be eschewed if, indeed, they were ever contemplated. The result was a species of docu-drama, of pseudo fiction using exhausted realism — an uneasy blend. It was this form that generated both the program’s subsequent success and the problems it encountered in the United States and abroad.

Although its initial distribution was not without difficulties and its commercial characteristics were invoked or used by television executives in many countries to avoid immediate acquisition of the program, “Holocaust” has been one of the mostly widely sold and seen abroad of all American television programs — including “Gunsmoke”. According to a recent count, “Holocaust” had been sold to at least thirty-five countries, although not necessarily shown in all of them. They include the Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Australia, Japan, Turkey, Israel and Nicaragua. But many countries, including all the states of Eastern Europe, as well as the USSR, have not acquired the program. And even when brought and shown, “Holocaust” has not been immune from emendation: the United Kingdom version reportedly deleted scenes showing Poles collaborating with the Nazis.

World-wide distribution and viewing of a television program dealing with a momentous subject should provide the opportunity for serious and dedicated research on the program’s impact and effects. Sadly, deplorably, there appears to have been no effort by the program’s producers, distributors or the exhibiting television organizations to stimulate, coordinate or support genuinely international and comparative research.

Nonetheless, research was undertaken by dedicated scholars, some attached to national television systems, in several countries. Convinced that the effects of “Holocaust” were too important to neglect, we decided to seek out and cull the research for this journal. Regrettably, we received mostly indifference, at best perfunctory assistance, from the American producers and distributors of the program.

This special issue of this journal is, therefore, a work of discovery and reclamation. It contains the most intriguing and provocative research we were able to discover. Most are one-country studies, but they are implicitly comparative in the sense that they ask many similar questions and are animated by the same concerns.

I would neither have obtained nor published these papers here

without assistance from several individuals. My thanks go to Roberta Pearson who helped this project get underway; to Professor James Halloran for permitting us to use the pages of the newsletter of the International Association for Mass Communication Research to solicit research from scholars; to the Josiah Charles Trent Foundation through a trust provided by Mrs. Sarah P. Duke for translation funds; to Sally McGraw and Horst Stipp of the National Broadcasting Company; and to Theodore Freedman of the Anti Defamation League of the B'Nai B'rith and Geraldine Rosenfield of the American Jewish Committee. Most of all, appreciation is due to Willem Langeveld, editor of the journal, who wisely understood the importance of the subject and its rightful place here.

We begin with the United States where "Holocaust" was devised and first shown. The data we present were obtained by the American Jewish Committee and are published with permission. They are bare, lack theory, offer ad hoc explanations, but are nonetheless intriguing and sometimes illuminating. This article is followed by Barbara Burstin's specific look at the educational effects precipitated in one American town by the program. Her research is one of those containing an attempt at a follow-up study.

The gap between the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany is bridged by an explicitly comparative study. In it, Professors Hormuth and Stephan use the television program to test a psychologically subtle research hypothesis (the Just World) on respondents in both countries.

Responses to "Holocaust" appear to have been more striking, dramatic and palpable, much less "academic" and "detached" outside the United States. This was especially the case in the Federal Republic of Germany. The program seems to have been seen not so much as imbedding factual incidents in a fictional plot but as a historical recreation, even actuality, represented in the lives of two families. Perhaps this is to be expected since Germans perpetrated the iniquitous crimes of the holocaust. But there are particular reasons for this heightened sense of reality, for the suspension if not the outright elimination of disbelief. The actors were unfamiliar; their voices were dubbed into German; the scenes were shot in European locations familiar to many German viewers; and, above all, there were no commercials.

Two substantial but entirely different articles are therefore devoted to the possible effects of "Holocaust" in West Germany. Tilman Ernst of the Federal Centre for Political Education in Bonn adduces survey data to offer a relatively optimistic account of the television program's effects, direct and indirect, on the public's opinions, beliefs and attitudes. In Frankfurt, Dieter Prokop and his associates interviewed a range of people, including workers, to probe Germans' individual reactions and responses to "Holocaust". Their conclusions are provocative and far more pessimistic than those of Ernst. These studies are followed by Peter Dusek's sensitive account of the effects

for political education of "Holocaust" in Austria; Giulio Carminati's summary of Italians' responses to the series; and a study of repercussions in the Netherlands by Dick Verzijden and Jan van Lil. Carina Nilsson's thoughtful exploration of responses from Sweden follows. Sweden was ostensibly neutral during the Second World War but it did provide a haven for the Danish Jews saved by their countrymen and women from deportation to Germany.

The next study surveys responses to "Holocaust" in the United Kingdom, Germany's major antagonist during the Second World War. This research can be compared with that from Sweden, especially on the question of why particular people consciously avoided watching the program. In turn, both studies may be usefully set against the research by Grant Noble and Craig Osmond of Australian students' reactions to characters in the program.

It is only fitting that our final country study comes from the state of Israel; for Israel's people are unlikely ever to forget the hideous events of the holocaust which many of them personally experienced. Hannah Levinsohn manages to be both academic and humane in her carefully wrought study.

Willem Langeveld's assessment of the mini-series is pessimistic: his critique of the political educational failure of the program is trenchant. It is appropriate, therefore, to end with Annette Insdorf's meditation of the holocaust on film and her evocation of the less commercial, less notorious, but far more eloquent and disturbing cinematic attempts to capture the horror and iniquity.

The events of the Holocaust challenge us to be in touch with the intolerable and yet strive to remain psychologically whole. As Bruno Bettelheim points out, "To ignore the intolerable, as if death by atrocity were an aberration and not a crucial fact of life, is to pretend an innocence that history discredits and statistics defame."

There are many questions which the television series "Holocaust" and its world-wide reception provoke. Is the singularity of the Holocaust itself belied and denied by this very program which has stimulated the greatest awareness about it? Are the causes of the Holocaust obscured by the events themselves so smoothly embodied by the television characters? Did viewers see themselves as innocent victims? Identify with persecutors or persecuted or both? Above all, we must return to the question posed by Bettelheim: does "Holocaust" encourage the view that the destruction of so many Jews was an aberration committed by a few insane power-crazy German leaders and their mindless followers; or does it arouse our awareness of the intolerable?