

# Punching Nazis: An Investigation of the Continued Assault on WWII History and the Holocaust in Action-Adventure Films



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## Abstract

This paper examines the implications of action-adventure films that use Nazis as the ultimate villain. These films use Nazis either without explaining the historical context or by simply fictionalizing parts of the Holocaust and WWII. This reduces Nazis to caricatures and minimizes WWII and the Holocaust. This thesis will first examine the historical roots of Nazi stereotypes drawing from the work of Sabine Hake and Susan Sontag, demonstrating how Nazi iconography and anti-Nazi films of the 1930s-1940s built the archetype for Nazis in later films. Next, this thesis establishes the connection between fictionalized historical events in movies and society's collective memory. These ideas will come together by examining the Indiana Jones franchise's use of Nazis, their reference to occultism, and their recycling of 1940s stereotypes. Next, I argue that films like *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare* (Guy Ritchie 2024) depict Nazi villains as buffoons in a way that mocks the Holocaust and World War II. Finally, I look at how the excessive exaggeration of violence to establish "representational history" creates a similar problem to ignoring history altogether, using *Hunters* (David Weil 2020) as a case study. A strong throughline in this thesis is Hannah Arendt's "Banality of Evil" argument from *Eichman in Jerusalem* which states that evil is not a characteristic that explains Nazi atrocities, as it is more ordinary evils like indifference and social climbing that creates the avenue for these acts to occur. These examples work together to solidify the assertion that American action-adventure films diminish and insult the true, deeply tragic events of WWII and the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazi party.

## Introduction

Cinema reflects its contemporary political atmosphere. By internalizing the political climate, films routinely create villains based on the perceived enemy of the time. These villains typically result in stereotypical generalizations of cultures. During the Cold War, the default evil antagonist was Russian; during the Afghanistan war post 9/11, villains were typically characterized as Middle Eastern terrorists; and when tensions with China rose, adversaries became Asian. These larger events are natural fodder for storytellers and have been adapted in numerous

ways. A key example of this, and the most common use of turning real-world events into shorthand for good versus evil, is the use of Nazis and the World War II era in action-adventure films. Nazis are used as cartoon villains in many American movies because they are an easy symbol of evil and can prop up the protagonist as a valiant hero. However, the larger landscape of events depicted tends to lose concreteness because of the genre.

It is not an exaggeration to say that every Jewish person has a family story rooted in persecution. The roots of Judaism are synonymous with adaptation,

expulsion, and regrowth. Even though these stories are common in Jewish circles, with Jewish people only making up 0.2% of the world's population, the stories are not widely known outside of the Jewish community. These stories fall into generalized categories based on greater events, such as the Roman Empire, the Spanish Expulsion, and of course World War II. Prominent filmmakers have noticed this pattern as well.

Steven Spielberg, known for his action-adventure movies, directed four out of the five Indiana Jones movies. Of these four movies, two of them center around Indiana Jones fighting against nefarious villains who happen to be Nazis, not because the film centers around the travesties of World War II but just to demonstrate they are the bad guys. In between the third (1989) and fourth movies (2008), Steven Spielberg directed *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg 1993), an account of a real businessman who rescued Jewish families from death in Nazi Germany through his factory. After his experience with making *Schindler's List* and establishing the Shoah Foundation, Spielberg vowed never to trivialize the Nazi party again (Weiss). After *Schindler's List*, any stories that did not depict Nazis truthfully felt morally wrong. His stance remained firm as he did not return as director of the most recent installment of Indiana Jones, *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (Weiss). As cinema continues to evolve (or devolve depending on who you ask) into more action franchises that rely on tropes rather than new storylines, it is increasingly important to re-evaluate how movies address and distort painful atrocities. The action-adventure genre within Hollywood uses Nazis as easily identifiable villains which trivializes the real history of the Holocaust and harms not only the Jewish community but the historical understanding of these horrific events and the collective cultural memory.

[...]

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