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# Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo- American Popular Culture, 1945–2020

Irreverent Remembrance

Jeffrey Demsky

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Jeffrey Demsky  
Political Science and History  
San Bernardino Valley College  
San Bernardino, CA, USA

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*For Tatyana*

## PREFACE

A Jewish merchandiser familiar with my scholarship once quipped to me that unsold inventory killed more Jews than the Holocaust did. Although I did not know it at the time, his tasteless joke about the perils of wholesale purchasing presaged this book's thesis. On the one hand, such impiety has the obvious capacity to offend. However, the joke's impertinence also sustains the lore's factuality. Indeed, for those whose tastes permit, the merchandiser's crack is possibly pedagogical because its referent humor validates the sinister nature of the reality it attempts to demystify. This book locates, assembles, and most importantly explains related expressions of irreverent memorializing in Anglo-American Holocaust discourses. I encourage scholars to seriously contemplate, rather than simply condemn, the increasing abundance of these provocative and sometimes problematic postures. Acknowledging that this history is increasingly removed from contemporary life, I am ultimately trying to explain how subversive portrayals benefit this memorialization by stoking its continued relevance.

At first glance, the proposition that contemplating absurdist portrayals can facilitate constructive remembrance may appear problematic. However, my book explains how and why nonconformist approaches are sometimes fruitful. Scholars must accept where people are in this difficult learning. We cannot insist that they meet us where we want them to be. Never has this challenge been more pressing. Seventy-five years past World War II's end, ours is a "fake news" age, an obvious toxic atmosphere for Holocaust remembrance. I posit that by embracing flippant representations, scholars will discover paths toward innovative pedagogy. If onlookers think that they "know" about the Holocaust from screening an attention-grabbing

movie, or reading a kitschy fictionalized novel, then we should use this familiarity—imperfect as it might be—as a springboard for delivering factual lessons. Rather than destabilizing truth functions, I observe that pop culture and other presentist appropriations construct memory bridges to this increasingly bygone past. Especially for uninitiated youthful consumers, startling representations, such as the type I have assembled, may ensure that this history is remembered at all.

San Bernardino, CA

Jeffrey Demsky



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote this book's first draft while on sabbatical. I am grateful to Chancellor Diana Rodriguez and the San Bernardino Community College District for sponsoring this opportunity. It is a pleasure to work at an institution that unflinchingly supports their professors' professional and intellectual development. Thank you also to Camille Davies at Palgrave Macmillan for contracting my manuscript and investing in its development.

Individuals do not produce scholarship alone. Lawrence Baron offered generous encouragement and keen feedback on early chapter drafts. Stephen Whitfield welcomed me to join him on several conference panels where I had opportunities to receive criticism from scholars that I otherwise would not have met. Victoria Aarons also helped a great deal, inviting me to contribute topical essays to various editions that she published. Kirsten Dyck sharpened my discussions of rock 'n' rollers and Nazi iconography. Randall Kaufman shared with me pertinent research that appears throughout this book. Vishnu-Priya Sneller managed the manuscript's technical formatting. Of course, I alone am responsible for the book's content, interpretations, and any possible blemishes.

My work benefits from some third-party materials. Thank you to Alessandro Palombo for granting me permission to include his cartoon prints in chapter three. Cambridge University Press approved my using an excerpt from Michael Berenbaum's *After Tragedy and Triumph Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* as the introduction's epigraph.

Most of all, I am grateful to my family. My wife and son do not have a particular interest in Anglo-American Holocaust representations, but they

do have an untiring dedication to me and my happiness, just as I do to them and their joys. Their love helped me to successfully finish this project, as much as any research that I read, or conference that I attended, or sentence that I wrote. Thank you, both, and to Fluffers, our cat, too.

## Praise for *Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo-American Popular Culture, 1945–2020*

“Jeffrey Demsky’s *Nazi and Holocaust Representations in Anglo-American Popular Culture* makes a vital contribution to Holocaust Studies. Beginning with the 1945 Nuremberg Trials and concluding with the emergence of potentially incendiary modes of representation in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, Demsky makes convincing claims for the complex ways in which even the most problematic pop cultural discourses reframe and extend Holocaust memory.”

—Victoria Aarons, *O.R. & Eva Mitchell Distinguished Professor of Literature, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, USA*

“No subject poses a greater challenge to the moral imagination than the Holocaust, nor raises more complicated questions than its memorialization and its pedagogy. To clarify these tricky issues, Jeffrey Demsky brings the resources of an enduring and serious engagement, a tenacious appetite for the detritus of popular culture, and a flair for crisp and lively prose. Demsky’s willingness to stalk the terrain of the most problematic expressions of Holocaust imagery is scrupulous and admirable.”

—Stephen J. Whitfield, *Professor of American Studies (Emeritus), Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA*

“Jeffrey Demsky examines whether “irreverent” depictions of the Holocaust in Anglo-American popular culture promote rather than diminish public awareness of the event. He illustrates how malleable the collective memories of it have been since 1945 from the Nuremberg Trials to Pepe the Frog memes. Distinguishing between constructive and destructive memorialization, he thoughtfully demonstrates how the former challenges Holocaust commemorative rituals and revives its relevance while the latter mocks its victims and minimizes its horrors.”

—Lawrence Baron, *Professor Emeritus, San Diego State University, San Diego, USA*

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