

# [***Opinion: 'The Zone of Interest' - a Holocaust movie without Jews***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BKM-6MV1-DY7V-G040-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Length:** 990 words

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; **Editor's note:** Peter Rutland is [*professor*](https://prutland.faculty.wesleyan.edu/) of government at Wesleyan University and an expert in the ***politics*** of contemporary Russia. He is a vice president of the [*Association for the Study of Nationalities*](https://nationalities.org/), which promotes scholarship in ethnicity, ethnic conflict and nationalism in Europe and Eurasia. The opinions expressed in this commentary are his own. View [*more opinion*](https://www.cnn.com/opinions) at CNN.

Director Jonathan Glazer's acclaimed movie "The Zone of Interest" recently won [*two Oscars*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/10/entertainment/zone-of-interest-oscars/index.html) - for best international feature film and for sound. [*Steven Spielberg has declared*](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/schindlers-list-oral-history-steven-spielberg-liam-neeson-1235830436/) it to be the best Holocaust film since his own "Schindler's List" came out in 1993.

In his Oscar acceptance [*speech*](https://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2024/mar/11/jonathan-glazer-oscars-speech-gaza-israel-video), Glazer, who is himself Jewish, invoked the Holocaust to criticize Israel's military actions in Gaza. His speech drew some [*praise*](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/mar/14/the-zone-of-interest-auschwitz-gaza-genocide) but also [*criticism*](https://variety.com/2024/film/news/jonathan-glazer-oscar-speech-zone-of-interest-open-letter-1235944880/) from the Jewish community - including from the movie's executive producer, [*Danny Cohen*](https://variety.com/2024/film/global/zone-of-interest-producer-jonathan-glazer-israel-1235942734/).

But in some important respects, the film is even more troubling than Glazer's speech.

The film documents the mundane life of the family of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Hoss (played by Christian Friedel) and his wife, Hedwig (Sandra Huller), while the atrocities themselves are kept out of sight behind the concentration camp wall. It was [*inspired*](https://theconversation.com/the-zone-of-interest-the-dark-psychological-insight-of-martin-amiss-holocaust-novel-is-lost-in-the-film-adaptation-221867) by the 2014 novel "The Zone of Interest" by Martin Amis, the enfant terrible of English letters whose works use satire as a vehicle for reveling in money, sex and power.

What the satiric movie "[*Saltburn*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/17/entertainment/saltburn-director-emerald-fennell-jacob-elordi/index.html)" does for the English upper class, "The Zone of Interest" is doing for National Socialism.

While the evil of Nazism is an abstraction in the movie, out of sight and out of mind, viewers are invited to identify with the daily life of the family Hoss. The lush images of the film convey an idyllic family life, with an immaculately clean house and bountiful garden. The Nazis loved their children and their pets. They played the piano.

Glazer [*has explained*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkkA_LMVtIk&ab_channel=FestivaldeCannes) that his goal was to show that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were not monsters but humans, just like us. It could have happened anywhere: to anyone, by anyone. Viewers are invited to consider that as we go about our mundane lives, evil is taking place somewhere behind a wall, which we chose not to look over.

But the whole idea of making a Nazi pastoral film is historically misleading and frankly offensive. As Israeli film critic [*Avner Shavit*](https://e.walla.co.il/item/3648566) has pointed out, Glazer has managed to make a film about the Holocaust in which we never see any Jews.

Likewise, in a 45-minute discussion of the film by the cast and crew at the [*Cannes Film Festival*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkkA_LMVtIk&ab_channel=FestivaldeCannes) in May, the question of Jews never came up. Instead, producer James Wilson talked about how white racism and colonialism were driven by beliefs "that were very similar to the ideas that were propagated by National Socialism in the 1930s." An audience member saw connections to the [*"Don't say gay" law in Florida*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/01/us/florida-dont-say-gay-bill-desantis-critics/index.html).

But the Holocaust happened to the Jews, at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, and its specificity should not be diluted into a general meditation on the [*banality of evil*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/14/opinions/adolf-eichmann-trial-anniversary-honig/index.html).

The movie's conceit is not a particularly clever or original take on history. The fact that the guards had happy moments during their time at the camp was vividly revealed by the [*photo album*](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz-through-the-lens-of-the-ss-the-album) of deputy commander Karl-Friedrich Hocker that was donated to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2007.

Glazer is echoing [*elements*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/08/zone-of-interest-hannah-arendt-banality-of-evil/) of the "banality of evil" argument laid out in Hannah Arendt's "[*Eichmann in Jerusalem*](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1963/02/16/eichmann-in-jerusalem-i)." In his 1961 trial, [*Adolf Eichmann's defense*](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/eichmann-trial) was that he was just a bureaucrat carrying out orders. But Arendt was wrong. Due to the release of long-hidden tapes that started to become [*available in the 2010s*](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/04/world/middleeast/adolf-eichmann-documentary-israel.html) that the Nazi official made while in exile in Argentina, we now [*know*](https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2022/07/15/the-eichmann-tapes-and-the-nature-of-evil) that Eichman, the chief logistics officer of the Holocaust, was an ideological [*zealot*](https://www.amazon.com/Eichmann-Jerusalem-Banality-Penguin-Classics/dp/0143039881/ref=sr_1_1) deeply committed to National Socialism.

For some time scholars have studied "[*banal nationalism*](https://www.amazon.com/Banal-Nationalism-Theory-Culture-Society/dp/0803975252)": the expression of national identity in everyday life. But there was nothing banal about the Holocaust.

Indeed, the film implies that Hoss was just doing his job. But Hoss was not just a bored bureaucrat and family man. He was [*a fanatical Nazi*](https://www.amazon.com/Architect-Death-Auschwitz-Biography-Rudolf/dp/1476681465) who had joined the party in 1922 and was sent to jail for participating in [*a political assassination*](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-real-history-behind-the-zone-of-interest-and-rudolf-hoss-180983531/) the following year.

"The Zone of Interest" is rather tedious as a film. It barely has a plot, and the conversations and daily routines are repetitious. Several scenes will leave viewers confused, such as the one where Hoss finds [*a jawbone*](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-real-history-behind-the-zone-of-interest-and-rudolf-hoss-180983531/) while fishing in the river and drags his kids out of the water. I would not have known what was happening except I had previously read in a review that there are supposedly human remains being dumped in the river.

Likewise, the local girlgoing out at night to leave food for the camp inmates ([*based on a true story*](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/the-zone-of-interest-real-life-polish-nazi-fighter-1235852362/)) will have mystified most of the audience. The scene will have pleased the Polish authorities [*who helped to produce the film*](https://variety.com/2023/film/features/cannes-poland-the-zone-of-interest-jonathan-glazer-1235600774/), since it portrays the Poles as helping the Jews. Yes, some Poles did heroically help Jews. But some joined in [*pogroms*](https://www.amazon.com/Neighbors-Destruction-Jewish-Community-Jedwabne/dp/0691234302/), or betrayed Jews in hiding to the Germans. These grim facts have been documented by historian [*Jan Gross*](https://www.amazon.com/Polish-Society-Under-German-Occupation/dp/0691656916/), provoking [*intense controversy in Poland*](https://www.timesofisrael.com/polish-prosecutors-drop-defamation-case-against-holocaust-scholar/). No sign of that in this film.

There is a long history of fascination with the aesthetics of the Third Reich, as in the films of [*Leni Riefenstahl*](https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/09/obituaries/leni-riefenstahl-filmmaker-and-nazi-propagandist-dies-at-101.html). Back in 1975, Susan Sontag wrote a perceptive essay condemning the [*fetishization*](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/) of Nazi paraphernalia. "The Zone of Interest" will certainly appeal to those who admire the aesthetics of Nazism: the striking uniforms, the distinctive "[*fashy*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/11/30/does-this-haircut-make-me-look-like-a-nazi/)" (short for fascist) haircuts, the nice animals. It will also appeal to people who like gardening.

But viewers who want insights into the tragic history of the Holocaust should look elsewhere.

Opinion by Peter Rutland

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