

*“I no longer agree with Hitler to exterminate them...”*. Teaching The Holocaust to Malaysian BA German-Students Through Selected History Films

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Torsten Schaar<sup>1</sup>

Chang Shi Wen<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The article describes experiences in teaching the sensitive topic of the industrial extermination of European Jews during World War II (the Holocaust) in the BA German programme at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The topic was covered in a history course and supported by the use of international feature films. Based on a summary of Malaysia-Israel relations, the relevance of the topic in the teaching of German as a foreign language is highlighted, and the teaching objectives, pedagogical approach and results of a film project are presented. The article aims to answer the questions of how Malaysian students perceived history films on the Holocaust and whether it was possible to achieve a more differentiated view of the Holocaust, at least among some students. As part of a comprehensive history film project on the Second World War, three history films dealing with the persecution and extermination of European Jews were screened and analysed in class. The film 'The Grey Zone' (USA, 2001) was selected for this article and students' responses and attitudes to challenging questions, provided as qualitative data, are discussed. Three historical literacies – Content Knowledge, Historical Empathy/Perspective Recognition and Narrative Analysis (METZGER 2007) – provided the theoretical framework for the history film project.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; BA German Programme; Universiti Putra Malaysia; history films

## 1 Introduction

On 24 October 2019, a young Malay (Muslim) man gave the Nazi salute to the assembled university graduates and faculty at his graduation ceremony at University Malaysia Sabah (USM).

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<sup>1</sup> German Jordanian University, School of Applied Humanities and Languages, Amman, Jordan. E-mail: [torstenschaar@web.de](mailto:torstenschaar@web.de). ORCID: 0000-0003-1651-8210.

<sup>2</sup> University Putra Malaysia, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Serdang, Malaysia. E-mail: [xantthe@gmail.com](mailto:xantthe@gmail.com). ORCID: 0000-0002-3883-1307.



Figure 1: Malay student giving the Nazi salute



Source: KL Coconuts, 26 November 2019

Writing on social media under the account “Ibn Ruru”, he declared in Malay language (translation was provided in the article):

This Hitler symbol that I style on the sacred UMS stage is because the world is blind and deaf when Jews rule, as if Islamic countries are clowns for the world’s entertainment. Therefore, in solidarity with Gaza and because of anger, hatred, and vengeance towards Jews. Therefore, I thank Hitler for the Holocaust. (KL COCONUTS 26 November 2019)

The post was signed with the hashtags #SaveGaza and #Pray4Palestine. While it is not uncommon for Malaysian political authorities to express anti-Semitic sentiments in public discourse, netizens were quick to condemn Ibn Ruru's action as a despicable act of hate, equating his hateful gesture with a show of support for Palestine. However, the University of Malaysia Sabah never issued an official statement (KL COCONUTS 2019).

This scene powerfully illustrates the rejection and hatred that many (including young) Malaysians, especially Malaysian Muslims, have for Jews in general and the State of Israel in particular, fostered by state-sponsored anti-Semitism, as well as the appalling ignorance of the unique crime in human history, the state-orchestrated extermination of European Jews during World War II by Nazi Germany, known as the Holocaust. Raphael Ahren (2020) notes that “Malaysia is often seen as one of the world’s most anti-Semitic

countries. [...] A survey by the Anti-Defamation League has found it harbors one of the highest rates of anti-Jewish sentiment in the region, if not the globe”.

Islam is the official religion of the country, although about 40% of the citizens belong to other faiths (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism...). Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003 and from 2018 to 2020), whose political focus has been to create a Malay identity by placing a strong emphasis on Islam, said that he is happy to be labeled anti-Semitic:

“How can I be otherwise, when the Jews who so often talk of the horrors they suffered during the Holocaust show the same Nazi cruelty and hardheartedness towards not just their enemies but even towards their allies should any try to stop the senseless killing of their Palestinian enemies” (MAHATHIR *apud* AHREN 2020).

In his 1970 book “The Malay Dilemma” Mahathir wrote that “[...]the Jews are not merely hook-nosed but understand money instinctively” (AHREN 2020; AT & JPA 2018).

In 2003, in a speech at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit in Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Mahathir “called for ‘1.3 billion Muslims’ to unite to ‘counterattack’ against the ‘few million Jews’ who had defeated them. He also suggested Jews sought to ‘wipe out’ all the world’s Muslims, and used the Holocaust as an example Muslims could emulate...” (AT; JPA 2018).

Malaysia has never had diplomatic relations with Israel; Malaysian passports bear the inscription ‘This passport is valid for all countries except Israel’; people with Israeli stamps in their passports are not allowed to enter Malaysia. Israeli athletes have been banned from international sporting events in Malaysia on several occasions; anti-Semitic literature is widely available in the country's leading bookstores. On commuter trains in Kuala Lumpur, a crossed-out Star of David suggests that Jews are not welcome.

Figure 2: Anti-Semitic symbol in a train in Kuala Lumpur



Source: Schaar (2020)

Anti-Jewish statements by authorities and citizens are usually justified as “compassion for the Palestinian plight”. Mary Ainslie, author of the book *Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Malaysia: Malay Nationalism, Philosemitism and Pro-Israel Expressions* (Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2019) argues that the unchecked growth of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel attitudes “are part of state-promoted social control in Malaysia”. However, Ainslie also describes that a growing demographic “[...]of educated, generally young, globally aware, middle-class citizens who believe in a secular society and want democratic representation [...] unhappy about their government’s restriction of their personal freedoms” who refuse to spread hateful Anti-Semitic propaganda and are beginning to question parents, teachers, religious leaders, and politicians. Ainslie also noted that an increasing number of young Malaysians are using social media and the internet to educate themselves about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Holocaust (AHREN 2020). Based on the assessment that many (including young) Malaysians (especially Malay Muslims) have latent anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli prejudices as a result of simplified and flawed representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the complex reality in contemporary Israel provided by the authorities, this article describes the author's experience as a senior lecturer in the Bachelor of Arts in Foreign Languages (German) programme (BA German) at the University Putra Malaysia (UPM) in teaching the challenging topic of the Holocaust as part of a German History course to Malaysian students.

The article first summarises the relevance of the topic in German as a Foreign Language teaching and then presents the teaching objectives, the didactic-methodical approach and the results of a film project. The article aims to answer two questions:

- How do Malaysian students perceive Holocaust-themed history films?
- Is it possible to achieve a more nuanced view of the Holocaust, at least for some students, through Holocaust-themed history films (as part of the teaching of the subject)?

Of the three historical films dealing with the persecution and extermination of the Jews that were shown and analysed in class, *The Grey Zone* (directed by Tim Nelson Blake, USA, 2001) is selected and students' responses and attitudes to challenging questions provided as qualitative data in group and individual assignments are discussed. Three historical literacy competencies – Content Knowledge, Historical

Empathy/Perspective Recognition and Narrative Analysis (METZGER 2007) provided the theoretical framework for the history film project.

## 2 The Relevance to Teach about the Holocaust in the German as a Foreign Language Classroom

The industrial extermination of a defined group of people in specially designed "death camps" – known as the Holocaust (or Shoah) – which was planned down to the last detail by the state and carried out until the last days of the Second World War at great material, human and financial cost, is undoubtedly the darkest chapter in German history and culture.

Although history enjoys a high status in German society, the period of National Socialism, World War II and the Holocaust shape the German present more than any other period of German and European history and are thus at the centre of Germany's active culture of remembrance (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 41-43). Springer (2020: 12) emphasises that the need to come to terms with National Socialism “[...]arises from the responsibility that citizens of the Federal Republic have towards the past”. National Socialism is interpreted “[...] as the negative founding myth of today's Germany” (*Ibidem*: 12). The remembrance of the Holocaust “is a reason of state and it is part of the political and social mandate of the Federal Republic of Germany ... to keep this latent in consciousness, to convey it and to pass it on” (*Ibidem*: 15).

The need to teach about National Socialism/World War II/Holocaust in German as a Foreign Language programmes arises from its contemporary and everyday significance. Traces of National Socialism and the Holocaust are clearly visible in everyday life in Germany – museums, exhibitions, memorials, concentration camps, statues, street names, “stumbling blocks” – and the period is omnipresent in television documentaries, history films, stage performances, academic publications, literature and the press. The classification of these traces of Nazi history in everyday life in Germany is not possible without background knowledge and a critical awareness of the problem (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 44). Relevance to the present has become the main criterion for including a historical topic in German as a Foreign Language classes. The aim is to find

explanations for contemporary phenomena that cannot be understood without sufficient historical knowledge.

Although many German learners worldwide have heard, read or seen something of National Socialism/World War II/Holocaust, half-truths and misinformation or (from a German point of view) untenable patterns of interpretation dominate, especially in countries geographically distant from Germany (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 45,47,50). The ethnocentric “half-knowledge”/ “false knowledge”/ “non-knowledge” must be transformed into “real orientation knowledge” and “questioning competence” through the targeted teaching of facts on this challenging topic, so that German learners can deal with it appropriately and participate in the reality of the target language country (*Ibidem*: 48).

Learning about history goes hand in hand with learning from history. Holocaust education must go hand in hand with the development of critical thinking, with education about the mechanisms of exclusion, dehumanisation and persecution of groups of people, with sensitisation to the prevailing prejudices, intolerance, stereotypes and everyday racism (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 54) that are part of Malaysia's multifaceted present.

Malaysia today is a deeply divided country ethnically, economically, religiously and culturally. The unequal treatment of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, which has been promoted by the state since the 1970s through the granting of special privileges to the Malay majority (*e.g.* in the allocation of jobs, university places, loans, land...), coupled with nepotism and corruption, leads to ongoing tensions among the population. The country had also experienced Sino-Malay sectarian violence in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May 1969, which left 196 dead (143 Chinese, 25 Malays, 28 others) and 439 injured (KIA SOONG 2007).

A discourse on the formation of enemy images and scapegoating is particularly necessary, although the Holocaust is not a typical example of the consequences of discrimination and exclusion, but an extreme case (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 63). Critical competence and the ability to distinguish between truth and propaganda (fake news) must also be trained. Students should be made aware of the challenges of multicultural societies, human rights and justice, genocide and active social participation (*Ibidem*: 6). Students should also be made aware “[...] that their own attitudes are ‘to some extent culturally determined’ and that [...] harmful stereotypes may emanate from some aspect of their culture” (MAITLES 2008: 343).

However, communicating the highly complex subject of the Holocaust is problematic. Springer sees the Holocaust as “[...] a narrative of national guilt, shame and disgrace [, something that...] no society likes to tell as part of its self-description” (SPRINGER 2020: 13). Due to time constraints, only the most important aspects and actors can be mentioned in class. The Holocaust is the most researched part of German history, but the question of how it could happen has not been fully answered. There is a lot of knowledge about who committed what crimes, when and where, but not about why? The figure of 6 million murdered Jews remains too abstract to evoke shock and empathy. Dealing with the Nazi era does not necessarily lead to a “universal value judgement” of condemnation; the opposite (a positive image of Hitler, for example) has also been observed by teachers in Arab countries, in India, in Taiwan (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 61,63), but also in China, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand and Malaysia<sup>3</sup>.

In current German as a foreign language textbook, the Holocaust is limited to general statements about the extermination of the Jews. Therefore, Ghobeyschi argues for extended lessons that allow enough time for reflection, discussion and questioning, as well as for a “reduction to the human sphere” by focusing on the story of individuals, which can be conveyed through all literary genres or through history films. The inclusion of the human sphere, the creation of “emotional participation” and “emotional involvement” are necessary for the achievement of the learning goal (GHOBEYSHI 2002: 7,78,131,132). History films “[...] personalize, dramatize and emotionalize historical events and characters. They revive the past by exemplifying it in the present, engage ongoing discourses of history and as a result have proven to be the most influential medium in conveying history to large audiences” (SCHAAR; CHANG 2022: 29).

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<sup>3</sup> In the latter countries, Nazi symbols were and are openly worn, Adolf Hitler was frequently used as an advertising medium (for potato chips in Thailand, 1997), Nazi-themed restaurants are run (*e.g.*, in Bandung, Indonesia), weddings are held in SS uniforms (China), translated Nazi literature is widely available etc. (The author taught for more than 20 years in Southeast Asia and has witnessed some aspects of it). In Thailand, a German Lecturer organized an exhibition on the Holocaust as an answer to an incident at Silpakorn University, where students dressed in Nazi uniforms. See: PÜLM, Felix. „The Darkest Chapter of Human History“ – Ein Ausstellungsprojekt zur Auseinandersetzung mit Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im DaF-Unterricht einer thailändischen Universität [An Exhibition Project for Teaching Nazism and Holocaust in German Classes at a Thai University]. In: *Info DaF*, v. 47, n. 7, 2020, 90-108.

### 3 Teaching the Holocaust

The BA German curriculum at UPM's *Fakulti Bahasa Modern dan Komunikasi* (FBMK) – a leading public university in Malaysia – combines philological subjects, market-oriented modules and teaching of German as a foreign language up to B2 level (GER). The BA German cohorts are dominated by female students (85%), with Malay (Muslim) women constituting the largest ethnic group (67%), followed by Malaysian Chinese women (17%). In addition to acquiring linguistic knowledge and the skills and competences to communicate adequately in German, BA students also acquire an understanding of cultural and historical content and its significance in German-speaking countries. The BA German curriculum at UPM's *Fakulti Bahasa Modern dan Komunikasi* (FBMK) – a leading public university in Malaysia – combines philological subjects, market-oriented modules and German as a foreign language teaching up to B2 level (GER). The BA German cohorts are dominated by female students (85%), with Malay (Muslim) women as the largest ethnic group (67%), followed by Malaysian Chinese women (17%). In addition to the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and the skills and competences to communicate adequately in German, BA students also acquire an understanding of cultural and historical content and its significance in German-speaking countries. Therefore, one of the compulsory courses for first-year students is “*Kajian Sejarah Jerman*” (Historical Survey of Germany with 42 contact hours over a period of 14 weeks), the only “pure” German history course in Southeast Asia, which the author has been teaching for 13 academic years. The course design follows the concept of traditional historiography (history of events with a focus on politics, economics, military, diplomacy) and teaches selected events of German history from the 8th century to the present, with the lecturer deciding which periods to focus on. As none of the students had any previous knowledge of German, the history course had to be taught in English. The Malaysian high school history textbook (*Sejarah Tingkatan 5 – World War I to present day Malaysia*) provides very limited information on German (and European) history and none on the Holocaust (ADAM; YACOB; SAMURI: 2002)<sup>4</sup>. The 2015 UNESCO publication

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<sup>4</sup> Treaty of Versailles: harsh restrictions and penalties being imposed on Germany, which ultimately led to World War II / Hitler's rise to power and the re-armament of Germany to fight economic depressions and to challenge the powers behind the Treaty of Versailles / Nazi-Germany attacks Poland; England and France declare war on Germany, the USSR attacks Poland as well / Germany was defeated and the war in Europe ended on 8th May 1945.

“*The International Status of Education about the Holocaust*”<sup>5</sup> concluded that Malaysia (referring to one history textbook published in 2012, page 10) must be categorized under “Context Only”<sup>6</sup> (causes and consequences of the Second World War): “The context in which the Holocaust took place is mentioned (World War II or National Socialism) without direct reference to the event itself” (CARRIER; FUCHS, MESSINGER 2015: 12, 36).

As the Holocaust as an event is not part of the national history curriculum in Malaysia and the country was not involved in the Holocaust, the author was confronted with extremely rudimentary knowledge and misinformation from the students. Some were completely unaware of the Holocaust. The terms “Holocaust” or “Shoah” were generally unknown to them. None of the students were aware of the existence of a Jewish heritage site, the Jewish cemetery in Georgetown (Penang)<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 3: Jewish cemetery in Georgetown, Penang Island, Malaysia



Source: photographed by Farhana Muslim Mohd Jalis

<sup>5</sup> The study documents the representation of the Holocaust in 272 secondary school level history and social studies curricula from 135 countries and in 89 textbooks from 26 countries.

<sup>6</sup> Categories: 1) Direct Reference, 2) Partial Reference, 3) Context Only, 4) No Reference (CARRIER; FUCHS, MESSINGER 2015: 12-13).

<sup>7</sup> The only existing Jewish cemetery (with now 107 tombstones) in Georgetown (Penang Island) is witness to a Jewish community which had existed in British Malaya/Malaysia in the 19th and 20th century. During and after World War II, many Jews emigrated to Singapore, Australia, Israel and to the United States of America. Some Jewish families stayed in Penang until the 1970s. The last Jew in Georgetown (David Mordecai) died in 2011. When Jalan Yahudi (Jewish Road) next to the cemetery was renamed Jalan Zainal Abidin in 2013, the only Jewish legacy in Malaysia was erased. See Malaysia and Israel Relationship. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel-Malaysia\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel-Malaysia_relations)> Accessed on 06.07.2022.

With a focus on the history of Germany in the 20th century, the learning objectives were to acquire sufficient knowledge of the most relevant facts and persons involved to be able to understand texts and other contemporary documents, as well as to recognise the relevance of the history of National Socialism/World War II/Holocaust (among others) for current developments and events in Germany. The acquisition of knowledge took place through a systematic transfer of knowledge and a cognitive-analytical examination of the learning content.

The persecution and extermination of the Jews as part of the history of National Socialism and World War II was taught didactically and methodically in several steps and using various media:

- (a) presentations with historical photos and excerpts from documents (teacher's narration and interpretation),
- (b) documentaries with historical footage, audio documents and narration. With these, important historical facts were conveyed, which were necessary for a deeper understanding of the ...
- ... (c) history feature films shown afterwards.

### 3.1 Presentations and Documentaries

The lecturer's presentations had the following content (with only aspects of the Holocaust listed in more detail in the individual chapters):

#### **Part I) Hitler's Third Reich (1933-1939)**

**1)** The rise of the NSDAP (1920-1933) / Adolf Hitler as Reich's Chancellor and "Führer" establishes a dictatorship 1933/34, **2)** NSDAP and Volksgemeinschaft, "Führerkult";

**3) Racial policies:** NS racial "sciences": the "Aryan race" as the master race, Jews as the ultimate enemy of the German people / discrimination and persecution of German Jews: the removal of Jews from universities, public offices and public life / the Nuremberg Laws (consisting of the "Reich Citizenship Law" and the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor"): Jews were demoted to the status of "individuals residing in the state.", marriages and extramarital relationships between Jews and "Aryans" were forbidden / Jews went into exile / "Night of the broken glass" – destruction of synagogues and Jewish businesses (9<sup>th</sup> November 1938) / the "Decree on the Exclusion of Jews from German Economic Life," according to which Jews were forbidden to own retail stores and workshops and to sell merchandise and services / Anti-Jewish propaganda;

**4)** The SS and Police System: incl. Jews as prisoners in concentration camps, **5)** Economy and Labour 1933-1939, **6)** Foreign Affairs and the Preparation for War (1933-1939).

## Part II) World War II

7) The “Blitzkrieg”, 8) War of Annihilation – Operation Barbarossa – Invasion of the Soviet Union (1941/42), 9) Defeat in the East – 1943-1944, 10) *Wollt ihr den totalen Krieg?* – The War Economy, 11) Organized Resistance (1933-1945);

**12) The Holocaust:** mass murder of Jews in German occupied territories (Poland, Soviet Union) – the Babi Jar massacre / the role of *SS-Einsatzgruppen* / Wannsee Conference decides to eliminate 11 Million Jews in Europe / Reinhard Heydrich, Adolf Eichmann as organizers of the extermination of the Jews / Jewish ghettos in occupied Poland / 1943: Warsaw ghetto uprising / deportation of the Jews to especially designed extermination camps such as Treblinka / Auschwitz-Birkenau as symbol for industrial mass murder / inhuman medical experiments by Josef Mengele in Auschwitz / liberation of the camps in 1945;

13) Liberation of Western Europe; / 14) The Final Battles of Nazi Germany – 1944/45.

The presentations were accompanied by the six-part BBC documentary “The Nazis: A Warning from History” (1997). Students were asked to answer questions about episode 4 “The Wild East” (Germanisation and ethnic cleansing in occupied Poland, persecution of Jews and the creation of large ghettos; interviewees include a ghetto survivor) and episode 5 “The Road to Treblinka” (content: The mass murder of Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and in the Treblinka extermination camp, pogroms against Jews by civilians in Lithuania, the plans of Nazi officials to exterminate 11 million European Jews; interviewees include a former member of an execution squad and a survivor of the Treblinka extermination camp).

Episode 4 (GHETTOS, time frame: 37:20-48:00): Students were asked to use the visual representation of ghettos to describe the conditions under which Jews had to live and survive there. Seventeen (out of 21) students gave answers, of which 9 were expected. The results were well below expectations. Only 5 (out of 17) students (23.5%) gave more than 50% of the expected answers, while 12 (70.5%) gave less than 50% of the expected answers. One can only speculate about the reasons – inattention, language problems, writing down only a few facts as a sufficient answer, speed of information. The table shows the expected answers and the percentage of answers given. The aspect of lack of food leading to hunger, starvation and often death (as represented by dead children in the streets) made the biggest impression on the participants. Several students described the scene of Jews waiting in the snow to be allocated an apartment and the interview with a former German merchant who profited from inflated food prices.

**Table 1:** Expected answers for Episode 4 and answers provided

<b>Expected answers</b>	<b>Answer given in % (N=17)</b>
Ghettos were places to concentrate Jews	47% (8)
Ghettos were places to isolate Jews	29.4% (5)
A constant shortage of food, which led to hunger and starvation	<b>70.6% (12)</b>
Barter economy: Jews sold their jewellery, clothes to pay for food / Overpricing of food by Germans and Poles (from outside the ghettos)	47% (8)
Shortage of accommodation / overcrowding	47% (8)
Jews as slave labourers in factories	29.4% (5)
Death as a common occurrence / mostly by starvation and diseases	47% (8)
Abuse of power by German officials – rape, murder, extortion of money, profiting from slave labour	29.4% (5)
Ghettos were places of constant suffering, punishment and random killings	29.4% (5)

Source: authors

Episode 5: Due to the lower-than-expected response to an open-ended question and the length of the episode (48 minutes), the questions were more precise and broken down into smaller steps to help focus on specific facts. The episode was watched at home, so repeated viewing was possible. The table shows the questions, the expected answers and the percentage of answers that met the expectations, reinforced existing knowledge and prepared the students for the feature films.

**Table 2:** Questions, expected answers and answers provided for Episode 5

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Expected answers</b>	<b>Answers given in % (N=17)</b>
What was Treblinka?	Nazi extermination camp in occupied Poland (1 of 6)	94% (16)
Why did the Nazis imprison Jews in ghettos?	Ghettos were regarded as a temporary measure until the fate of the Jews was decided	88% (15)
Why did the Nazis persecute the Jews?	Jews were seen as racially inferior but dangerous; Nazi ideology believed in a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to destroy Germany / Jews were “carriers of Bolshevism”	70.5% (12)
What did the Nazis intend to do with the Jews in 1940?	No plans for a systematic killing / deportation of Jews to the island of Madagascar	82% (14)

How was the war against the Soviet Union different from other wars?	a close connection between Judaism and Communism (the ideological enemy of National Socialism) was assumed / a war without mercy / mass murder of Jews	70.5% (12)
What was the role of the SS- <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> and who were their targets?	Special units of SS and Police to exterminate the Jews in the occupied territories <sup>8</sup>	82% (14)
Why did the SS also kill Jewish women and children?	To exterminate the Jews as race entirely / to prevent future acts of revenge	88% (15)
What did the Nazis mean with “more humane killing methods”?	humane for the murderers not the victims / many executioners were traumatized by shooting women and children at close range / experiments with poisonous gas	82% (14)
What happened for example in Lithuania? / How were local people involved?	German Wehrmacht was greeted as liberators from Soviet oppression / Pogroms against Jews who were blamed for collaboration with the Soviet oppressors / Jews were rounded up and beaten to death by civilians / organized cleansing of Lithuanian towns and villages of Jews, Lithuanians as active executioners in <i>Einsatzgruppen</i>	94% (16)
What did Hitler blame the Jews for?	For bringing the USA into the war	82% (14)
The mass killings of the European Jews were the end point of certain developments. What happened / what was decided at the following dates?	September 1941: Jews were marked with the Star of David 18. December 1941: Hitler and <i>Reichsführer SS</i> Himmler met to discuss the “Jewish question” / Himmler’s diary entry: “extermination as partisans” January 1942: Wannsee conference, the deportation and the extermination of 11 million European Jews is decided	88% (15)

<sup>8</sup> At this point, the author referred to the Sook Ching (purge) massacre(s) in Japanese-occupied Singapore and British Malaya (18 February – 4 March 1942), during which several thousand Chinese were killed by the Japanese Imperial Army’s secret police “*Kempeitai*” as “anti-Japanese elements”. The number of victims is unknown; it varies between 5000 and 25,000, depending on the source. “At the behest of Masanobu Tsuji, the Japanese High Command’s Chief of Planning and Operations, Sook Ching was extended to the rest of Malaya. [...] Specific incidents were Kota Tinggi, Johore (28 February 1942) – 2,000 killed; Gelang Patah, Johor (4 March) – 300 killed; Benut, Johor (6 March) – number unknown; Johore Baharu, Senai, Kulai, Sedenak, Pulai, Renggam, Kluang, Yong Peng, Batu Pahat, Senggarang, Parit Bakau, and Muar (February–March) – estimated up to 25,000 Chinese were killed in Johor; Tanjung Kling, Malacca (16 March) – 142 killed; Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan (15 March) – 76 killed; Parit Tinggi, Negeri Sembilan (16 March) – more than 100 killed (the entire village); Joo Loong Loong (near the present village of Titi) on 18 March (1474 killed, entire village eliminated by Major Yokokoji Kyomi and his troops); and Penang (April) – several thousand killed by Major Higashigawa Yoshimura. Further massacres were instigated as a result of increased guerilla activity in Malaya, most notably at Sungei Lui, a village of 400 in Jempol District, Negeri Sembilan, which was wiped out on 31 July 1942 by troops under a Corporal Hashimoto.” The Japanese also killed thousands of Tamil Indians in Singapore and British Malaya. Sook\_Ching. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sook\\_Ching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sook_Ching)>.

Describe the fate of the European Jews in 1942/43.	Liquidation of the ghettos, deportation of Jews and mass killing of in death camps	94% (16)
Name the infamous death camps.	Treblinka, Chełmno, Majdanek, Belzec, Auschwitz	82% (14)
How many people were killed in Treblinka?	750.000-800.000	100% (17)

Source: authors

### 3.2 The History Film Project

The use of feature films – especially suitable for young adult learners – as an attractive, modern, motivating, emotionally appealing and efficient “real-life learning” teaching and learning medium in foreign language teaching, for “conveying and experiencing authentic language in real communication situations, for goal-oriented teaching”, its many advantages (and disadvantages), the selection criteria and its multiple didactic applications, have been extensively researched, described in detail and widely published and will therefore not be discussed in detail here (BIECHELE 2010).

This also applies to the role and great didactic potential of historical films (HF) in foreign language teaching. A well-prepared lesson on historical events using HF not only provides the necessary background knowledge and concepts, but also develops media literacy, historical competence and analytical skills that help and guide students in understanding the meaning of the film. They also develop students’ ability to understand HF not just as an entertainment product, but as a constructed ‘document’ that needs to be discussed, analysed, critiqued and interpreted. HF help students to identify multiple perspectives (and lack of perspective), to explain different viewpoints and motivations of characters/groups in the past, to distinguish between truth and fiction, and to see how past events shape the world today (MARCUS; METZGER; PAXTON; STODDARD 2010: 7, 9, 17, 18, 25; WOELDERS 2007: 373-381).

A 9-stage history film project (entitled “Exploring World War II”) was designed and implemented with several cohorts of German BA students. As a descriptive case study, the theory of historical literacy competencies (HLC) (METZGER 2007) as part of media literacy was used as a theoretical framework. Seven groups of three to four members were formed and each group was assigned a specific topic: Group 1 – *The Germans at War*; Group 2 – *The Holocaust (Ghettos)*; Group 3 – *The Holocaust (Death Camps)*; Group 4 – *Europe under the Swastika (Military Resistance)*; Group 5 – *Europe*

*under the Swastika (Civilian Resistance)*; Group 6 – 1945 (*The last Days of Nazi Germany*); and Group 7 – 1945 (*Between War and Peace*). Each group was given four pre-selected history films (28 HF) to use as tools to develop 3 HLC and instructions on how to select the most appropriate film to screen in class. The groups were fully briefed on the theory of HLC and asked to develop viewing questions based on this theory. Group members discussed and agreed the selection criteria and made the final selection of the film. The selected HLCs were screened during regular classes in academic weeks 9 to 14. Data were collected using qualitative research methods (written group reports and individual assignments based on guiding questions) and analysed using an inductive approach. The post-screening discussions took place after the submission of the individual assignments. Based on the outlined selection criteria:

- an authentic sense of the events of the Holocaust with a focus on Jewish ghettos and/or concentration/death camps;
- the depiction of the persecution and suffering of the Jews;
- human and inhuman behaviour of characters;
- human interest stories and emotional impact;
- the film as a source of historical information;
- *mise en scene* ... the students of groups 2 and groups 3 (but also of group 5 applying different criteria) selected the following Holocaust based films.

#### Group 2 – The Holocaust (Ghetto)

***The Pianist*** (France, Germany, Poland, UK, 2002), Director: Roman Polanski.

An adaptation of the autobiography “The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945” tells the incredible story of Polish Jewish pianist and composer Władysław Szpilman's survival against all odds in the Warsaw Ghetto and the ruins of the Polish capital.

#### Groups 3 – The Holocaust (Death camps)

***The Grey Zone*** (USA, Spain, 2001), Director: Tim Blake Nelson.

(Synopsis below)

#### Group 5 – Europe under the Swastika (Civilian Resistance)

***Süskind*** (Netherlands, 2012), Director: Rudolf van den Berg.

Set in Amsterdam, the film chronicles the secret attempts by German-Jewish businessman Walter Süskind and others to save more than 600 Dutch Jewish children from deportation and death in Nazi extermination camps.

*The Grey Zone* is presented here in more detail, and students’ responses to specific questions focus on three historical literacy competencies – Content Knowledge (CK),

Narrative Analysis (NA), Historical Empathy/Perspective Recognition (HE/PR)<sup>9</sup> – are analysed and interpreted.

Synopsis: *The Grey Zone* is based on the book *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* by Dr. Miklós Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish physician chosen by the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele to be chief pathologist and assistant in inhuman medical experiments at the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp. Depicting the entire extermination process of Jews from their arrival at Auschwitz to the disposal of their ashes, the film tells the story of “*Sonderkommando XII*” and their October 1944 uprising, the only one ever to take place at Auschwitz. The opening title card reads:

As a part of the final solution the Nazis employed ‘special units’, known as the Sonderkommandos, to aid in the extermination process at Third Reich death camps. These Jewish moles ushered victims into the gas chambers and processed their corpses after gassings. In exchange for their work, they received privileges unheard of by camp standards, before being exterminated themselves after four months. (*The Grey Zone*, title card)

The mostly Hungarian members of the *Sonderkommando* – aided by female prisoners who work in ammunition factories and organise explosives – struggle to organise an armed revolt, but before the uprising can begin, a 14-year-old girl is discovered who has miraculously survived the gassing. In a desperate attempt at personal redemption, the men become obsessed with saving this one girl, but she is discovered by *SS Oberscharführer* Muhsfeldt, the *SS* officer in charge of the gas chamber/crematorium complex. Dr. Nyiszli works with Muhsfeldt to save his family from extermination and provides information about the uprising. Muhsfeldt promises to save the doctor's family and the girl.

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<sup>9</sup> **Content Knowledge:** Identifying important content and arranging detailed facts to support a broader, conceptualised past / distinguishing fictional elements and viewing film as a historical statement created by filmmakers to present specific themes and interpretations of the past / film as a secondary source / Guiding questions e.g.: “How can the interpretation of film be supported by the available scientific evidence? / To what extent were the characters based on direct historical evidence and to what extent were they fictionalised?”.

**Narrative Analysis:** Why does this film present the past from the perspective of these particular characters and using these particular images, stories or themes? How do these images, stories and themes shape the way the past is presented and received by the viewer? How are characters constructed e.g., composite characters?

**Historical Empathy / Perspective Recognition:** involves a rational investigation of past perspectives that explains historical actions in terms of the attitudes, beliefs and intentions of people in the past. See Metzger (2007).

The uprising begins and Crematorium IV is destroyed with smuggled explosives. Gun battles with the *SS* ensue, many *SK* are killed, the rest are captured and executed. The girl who was forced to watch the execution is allowed to escape towards the main gate of the camp. She runs, but Muhsfeldt draws his pistol and shoots her. The film ends with a voice-over recitation by the dead girl<sup>10</sup>. In title cards, the fate of persons involved is revealed:

- “Dr. Miklos Nyiszli survived internment. He died of natural cause a decade after his release from the camps, never having practiced medicine again. His wife died in the late 1970s. The whereabouts of his daughter is unknown”;
- “*Oberscharführer* Erich Muhsfeldt was tried in Cracow by the Supreme National Tribunal in 1947, where he was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out”;
- “Of thirteen consecutive units of Sonderkommandos at Auschwitz, the twelfth rebelled. Its members destroyed nearly half the ovens on the Third Reich's largest and numerically most lethal death camp. These ovens were never rebuilt.” (The Grey Zone, DVD).

## 4 Results

The students' responses and evaluations examined here refer to the 9 guiding questions/tasks on the film *The Grey Zone* and to Cohort 14 of the BA German programme, which consisted of 21 students (17 female and 4 male). Each student was given a code, which is used below. The guiding questions were mainly related to the development of the historical competences Narrative Analysis (NA) and Historical Empathy/Perspective Recognition (HE/PR). The students identified the extermination process of the Jews in Auschwitz, the cruel activities of the *SK* in support of mass murder, historical personalities (Nyiszli, Muhsfeld, Mengele), the survival of a young Hungarian girl in the gas chamber as well as the armed uprising of *SK* XII and the destruction of the crematorium in October 1944 as historical facts (Content Knowledge). A film title names and identifies a film, and it is related to its content. The students were asked the

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<sup>10</sup> Because of the frustration with the tragic ending in *The Grey Zone* Group 2, cohort 13 excluded the film from their selection: “The reason we didn't choose this movie is because the focus of the Jewish Sonderkommando performing their duties while planning to destroy one of the crematoria using the help from Polish people nearby to saving a small girl from being killed. This movie also did not have an upbeat ending. The movie is full of struggles of people in the concentration camp trying to save their lives and other's but at the end of the movie, nobody is alive. This marks their efforts are quite pointless because not even a single live is saved at the end of the movie” (page 8, Group Report, Cohort 13, BA German students, UPM, unedited).

introductory question: 1) *What is the meaning of the title 'The Grey Zone'? (Pay especially attention to the final scene)* (NA) The students identified two meanings:

a) Reference to the color grey itself, to an area, to people and objects: smoke, ash and dust from the crematorium cause the air to be grey / specks of ash from burned bodies float in the air and cover the people working at the crematorium,

b) Reference to the “moral grey zone” of:

- Dr. Nyiszli - survival vs morale / he is forced to experiment on children, twins and “dwarfs” / he assists Dr. Mengele / he collaborates with *SS Oberscharführer* Muhsfeldt to keep the own family alive and betrays his fellow Jews,
- *SK*: “aiding the *SS* to kill other Jews”, “preparing the gas chamber, lying to fellow Jews, ushering the people into the gas chamber, burning the bodies in exchange for a better life but also trying to save the girl” / “the existence of *SK* between life and death, plus the zone between absolute good and bad” / grey zone “describes the dreary, sullen, harrowing place of a death camp and the sadness, helplessness and sufferings of the Jews within”,
- “grey = bleakness of a situation and negative emotion”

NH answered by quoting the Jewish girl:

“After the revolt, half the ovens remain. And we are carried to them together. I catch fire quickly. The first part of me rises in dense smoke that mingles with the smoke of others. Then, there are the bones, which settle in ash. And these are swept up to be carried to the river. And last, bits of or dust simply that float there, in air, around the working of the new group. These bits of dust are grey. We settle on their shoes and on their faces and in their lungs. And they become so used to us, that soon they don't cough and they don't brush us away. And this point, they're moving. Breathing and moving, like anyone else, still alive in that place. And this is how the work continues.” In my opinion, ‘The Grey Zone’ refers to these cremation sites. The colour ‘Grey’ is the colour of the bits of dust which comes from the ashes of these burned bodies and their bones. The ovens are bound to be full of these grey dust as the number of bodies burned are countless. Since, there is a lot of dust (the colour grey) in the cremation site, thus the name ‘The Grey Zone’”.

Question 2 aimed to develop the students’ HE/PR competence and to elaborate on their comments on Question 1: *Which moral dilemma(s) did the members of the Sonderkommando (SK) face? (HE/PR)*

The students discussed two main decisions that the *SK* had to make:

- to support the *SS* in killing their fellow Jews in order to prolong (or even preserve) their own lives,
- to actively resist, which would have meant their certain death and that of their fellow prisoners.

The protagonists of the film (*SK* as a unit) were aware of their complicity as part of the Nazi killing machine, so some decided to engage in armed insurrection and destroy

the crematoria in order to at least delay the extermination of more Jews. They chose a rather hopeless armed struggle against a superior force rather than planning an escape. Several students mentioned that many *SK* could not live with what they were forced to do by the *SS* (e.g. the suicide attempt of the old man who had to burn the corpses of his family), as *SK* Simon discussed with Dr. Nyiszli, stating that he didn't want to live “after everything is done”.

Only one student (YQL) pointed out that several female prisoners who had stolen explosives from their workplaces to support the uprising had been tortured, and many others from the work detail had been killed. These women had also chosen active resistance, accepting the killing of fellow prisoners who were unaware of their actions.

The discovery of the surviving girl in the gas chamber and the decision of individual *SKs* to hide her put the whole plan of the uprising in jeopardy.

The next question tested the students' emotional intelligence by asking them to make a judgement about the *SK* – young Jewish men who were selected for the units on arrival at the camps without being briefed on what their tasks would be – and to discuss the question of ‘guilt’ or ‘innocence’ as they perceived them, which is difficult to do given the extreme brutality of the circumstances, unimaginable to those not involved.

The Holocaust Encyclopedia (*Sonderkommandos* Last Edited: 17 Sep 2020) describes the tasks of unimaginable horror that the *SK* had to perform:

The Sonderkommandos [...] fulfilled many roles in the gas chamber/crematoria complex, beginning with the arrival of victims. Sonderkommando Jews were present in the undressing area, instructing arriving victims to undress and how to arrange their clothing, which would later be confiscated by the *SS*. After the gassing was carried out by camp personnel, men of the Sonderkommando entered the gas chamber, untangled bodies, and cleaned the by then ventilated room. An elevator then raised the bodies to the crematorium. There, another group would shave the hair of the victims and search the bodies for hidden valuables, including gold teeth, which were removed and handed over to the *SS*. Finally, the Sonderkommando Jews would carry out the burning of bodies in the ovens and the disposal of the ashes [...]. Work in the Sonderkommando was physically exhausting and psychologically destructive. These prisoners were forbidden from warning the incoming victims of their fate and were forced to participate in the process of killing. The prisoners' days were numbered. Members of the Sonderkommando were routinely shot. Of all the prisoners in the camp, they knew the most about the Nazi "Final Solution" and could not be permitted to survive to testify. They were kept completely apart from the rest of the prisoners, either in the gas chamber complex itself or in separate barracks [...]. Usually, they were aware that they would be murdered after a few months of work. Those who made the difficult decision to resist or refuse to follow orders risked immediate death. They faced horrific circumstances and dilemmas that have been the subject of study by scholars and filmmakers. (THE HOLOCAUST ENCYCLOPEDIA, SONDERKOMMANDOS)

3) *How do you judge the SK members – Are they “guilty” for being involved in the killing machinery? Please consider the pressures and motivations which may have affected the choices they have made (HE/PR).*

Seven students (33%) declared SK 'guilty by association', specifically for actively lying to the Jews about what was going to happen to them in the showers and afterwards, and for not actively resisting. NH stated:

“Yes, they are guilty for being involved in the killing machinery because they helped in lying to the Jews about the gas chambers and burned them in the ovens. The *Sonderkommando* in the scene where new Jews were being brought into these camps and were to that they would be taking a shower. In that scene, one of the *Sonderkommando* said: “*You’re all fine. The quicker you get undressed, the quicker you’ll be cleaned, settled and reunited with your families*”. This clearly shows that they were lying to the Jews about what will happen to them. A man said, “*Filthy liar*”. The *Sonderkommando* continued, “*Remember the number on the hook you hang your clothes on*”. The Jewish man once again said, “*He’s a liar! I can’t believe it’s Jews doing this!*”. When the Jewish man asked the *Sonderkommando*, “*Look me in the eye and tell me I’m not gonna be killed.*” [11] This shows one of the guiltiness of the *Sonderkommando*, involved in the killing of the machinery. They could’ve disobeyed the order and have their lives cut off in exchange, but due to will of surviving, they were willing to undergo this culpability.”

Three students (14%) discussed the “grey area” between active participation in the killing process and human nature and the instinct to survive in extreme and life-threatening situations, but also tended towards “guilty”. Eleven students (52%), however, absolved the SK of any guilt, pointing out that they had been forced to carry out these gruesome activities, to resort to inhuman and despicable measures, and would have lost their lives immediately if they had refused the orders. The students expressed their understanding and sympathy for the SKs and their brutal living conditions in the face of mass killings (although they received much better rations, alcohol and cigarettes and slept on soft beds). They also pointed out that the SKs had not actively killed fellow Jews (with the exception of Hoffmann) and had only provided support, but had also suffered from immense feelings of guilt, which had prompted the destruction of the crematorium and the attempt to rescue the girl.

Task 4 related not only to the visualisation of the killing process, which in this film itself violates a cinematic taboo – showing the gassing – but also to the Holocaust

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<sup>11</sup> SK Hoffmann in frustration beats the old man to death soon after; his screaming wife is shot by an SS-guard and Hoffmann is being awarded the old man’s watch by the smiling SS-guard.

iconography often used in films on the subject (*e.g.*, World War II-era railway carriages, the slogan "Work makes free", smoking chimneys, extinguishing candles...). Most participants were able to complete Task 4: *Identify 10 ways/symbols etc. of how the mass killing of the Jews is visually represented* (NA) by noticing:

- Freight trains with Jews arriving in Auschwitz;
- Long line of Jews moving underground, an orchestra playing;
- Jews undress and prepare to enter the gas-chamber (shower room) / *Sonderkommando* members usher them inside / the closing of the doors;
- A SS-man wearing a gas mask drops the Zyklon B into an opening;
- People suffocating in the gas-chamber;
- The inside of the gas-chamber (blood, excrements, scratch-marks on walls, cleaning, repainting after the gassing);
- Large amounts of coal being delivered to the crematorium;
- Burning of the bodies in the crematorium / Smoking chimneys;
- A truckload of dead bodies arrive at the crematorium;
- Piles of dead bodies in front of crematorium;
- Truckloads of human ash being driven away;
- Executions of Jews near the crematorium;
- Electrical fences, watchtowers;
- Random killings and torture, suicide in an electrical fence;
- Piles of clothes, hair;
- A mass grave, open fire pit;
- medical experiments on inmates, autopsies;
- life and death of the *Sonderkommandos*.

5) *How does the sound (film music, sound effects) contribute to the representation of the mass killing?* (NA)

Film music bridges the gap between image and sound, creating a basic emotional mood or evoking an emotional response in the viewer. Sound effects add naturalness to the film. Participants pointed out that very little music is used (except for an orchestra of prisoners playing Strauss as the Jews are marched into the killing complex). However, the sound of the killing process supports the viewer's imagination of the Jews dying in the gas chambers:

- The muffled sound of the collective screaming of anguished, fearful, panicking and finally dying victims. The banging on the doors fades into silence (moment of the killing is represented by sounds, not depicted except a few seconds in the gas chamber, when the little girl sinks to the ground).
- The ventilation of the gas chamber (the sound plus a still picture of *SK* in a dark corner with a bottle of alcohol in his hand, listens to the changing sound (audience as well)), the *SK* wait for the ventilation to shut off, put on their gasmasks and start to empty and clean the gas chamber.

The sounds of gunshots and the roar of the fires in the ovens have also been identified as adding an essence of horror and fear to the situation.

6) *Why do you think that some Sonderkommandos wanted to save the girl?* (HE/PR)

The question gave the students the opportunity to delve deeper into the psyche of the *SK*, to speculate about his motives for saving the girl (if not expressed in the dialogue) and thus to become emotionally involved. The scenes are based on real events: the survival of a 16-year-old Hungarian girl in the gas chamber (in an air pocket) (CK).

The written answers included assumptions such as: “They felt pity for the girl”, “they did not want to burn her alive” (6 similar mentions) / “they tried to do the human thing, although there is no hope of survival” (6 similar mentions) / it represents their moral dilemma, they are not killers but active participants in the killing process and felt obligated to save at least one life, it presents hope, “try to save her out of guilt, lying and leading Jews to their deaths” (4 similar mentions) / “to appease their disturbed conscience”, “the attempt to save the girl’s life gave them back their sanity and fueled their desire to fight against the Germans” (5 similar mentions) / “they wanted to save a witness to tell the tale”, “a survivor of the gas chamber can bear witness when liberated” (3 similar mentions); one student even speculated: “Since the teenage girl was naked, maybe they wanted to have sex with her.” NH's remarks are representative for all participants (unedited):

The *Sonderkommandos* were forced to burn the bodies of the people who shared the same faith as them. They had to witness and execute all these inhumane acts in order to live. Thus, the sense of guilt rises within them. When this opportunity arrived, (to save the Jewish girl) they were willing to risk their lives. The scene where Hoffman said to the girl: “I used to think so much of myself... What I'd make of my life. We can't know what we're capable of, any of us. How can you know what you'd do to stay alive, until you're really asked? I know this now. For most of us, the answer... is anything. It's so easy to forget who we were before... who we'll never be again. There was this old man, he pushed the carts, and on our first day, when we had to burn our own convoy, his wife was brought up on the elevator. Then his daughter... and then both his grandchildren. I knew him. We were neighbors. And in 20 minutes, his whole family, and all its future, was gone from this earth. Two weeks later, he took pills and was revived. We smothered him with his own pillow, and now I know why. You can kill yourself. That's the only choice. I want them to save you. I want them to save you more than I want anything. I pray to God we save you.” Next, it can also be seen when Hoffman and his friend awaits their deaths when he said: “We did something”.

The students’ responses reflected their intellectual and emotional engagement with this complicated and life-threatening situation and outlined the *SK*’s motives for

saving the girl – feeling guilty, an act of humanity in a seemingly hopeless situation, seeking redemption and forgiveness, a symbol of hope – which probably corresponded to reality. During the film discussion, the following scene was shown again and the moral dilemma of the *SK* was discussed in summary, using Hoffmann (played by David Arquette) as an example:

Scene: A new trainload of Hungarian Jewish prisoners arrives, and all are immediately sent to the gas chambers. As the group is given instructions about "delousing", a fearful, angry man in the group begins shouting questions at one of the Sonderkommandos, Hoffman (Arquette), who has been issuing the instructions. Hoffman beats him to death in an attempt to make the man stop talking, calling the *SK* "Nazi Jews" and over a watch Hoffman desires. (The screaming wife is shot dead by the *SS* guard who watched the scene unfold). The *SS* guard then takes the watch and gives it to Hoffman – smiling!

*What are our thoughts about this scene related to the title Grey Zone and the moral dilemma of the SK?* The multi-layered answers are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Summarized statements referring to a scene

Summarized Statements	Students (N=21)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene represents the confusion of <i>SK</i>, their moral dilemma of helping Germans to kill/sacrifice Jews in order to prolong their own life / achieve a better life, food, treatment,</li> <li>• Helping to kill their own people is a betrayal of their humanity, of their conscience,</li> <li>• Hoffmann killed the Jew out of frustration, anger, stress, guilt about his own doings / the elderly Jew is correct: <i>SK</i> are liars and collaborators, "Nazi Jews".</li> </ul>	16 similar statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>SS</i> man awards H for killing the elderly Jew,</li> <li>• It shows the dehumanization of <i>SK</i>,</li> <li>• Jews killing Jews over a possession (stereotypical Jew),</li> <li>• <i>SS</i> man seems to indicate "You are guilty and fighting it won't undo the guilt."</li> <li>• <i>SK</i> become murderers on their own, <i>SK</i> doing <i>SS</i> work, the killing,</li> <li>• <i>SS</i> man is proud of him for killing a Jew, amused that Jews hate and kill each other.</li> </ul>	10 similar statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relates to title, a place where there is no black and white, normalcy does not apply any longer</li> </ul>	4 similar statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• long time bottled-up outburst, Hoffmann lost control, he beat up the guilt in himself,</li> </ul>	4 similar statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene shows the desperate attempt to survive, human nature, survival tops moral, decency and humanity,</li> <li>• <i>SK</i> are mentally tortured, they have to give false hope to Jews who thought the really will take a shower, every day they see people die and suffer.</li> </ul>	4 similar statements

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hoffmann killed the elderly Jew to stop causing a panic, which interrupts the killing process, keep the machine running</li> </ul>	3 similar statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the only scene which shows an active killing of a Jew by a SK, crossing a line, a breakdown of humanity, Hoffmann steps into his grey zone</li> </ul>	1 statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Jewish SK Hoffmann is not only a victim, but becomes a perpetrator</li> </ul>	1 statement

Source: authors

Taking into account their prior knowledge and other Holocaust films they had seen (*The Pianist*, *Colette*, *Süskind*), students were asked to comment on the following question:

7) *Do you think this film represents the Holocaust comprehensively?* (CK, NA)

All the students pointed out that a single film can never deal comprehensively with the complex subject of the Holocaust, but must limit itself to certain aspects, periods or groups of people. *The Pianist* focuses on the Warsaw Ghetto and *Süskind* is set in Amsterdam. *The Grey Zone* is set not only entirely in Auschwitz, the symbol of the industrial killing of the Jews of Europe, but also in one of the centres of the killing machinery, a gas chamber/crematorium complex. The film shows the entire process of the extermination of the Jews (even the dying in the gas chamber) and foregrounds the moral questions of the traumatised people involved (including the SS man in charge, Muhsfeldt). NH: “I believe that this film showed the key actions of the Holocaust which are when the Jews are stripped off naked into the gas chambers, where their lifeless bodies are then dragged and burned in the ovens”. AL: “The death camp represents the Holocaust ... The process of killing, burning and shooting are nicely shown... Even though they did not straightforwardly show the execution process, but as an audience deep down we know and can visualize”. YQL points out that the “eerie feeling of the camp” is well portrayed: “bodies are just piles of meat and flesh waiting to be burned, workers are just some tools that has no feelings towards the bodies of the dead”.

8) *Do you think there should be any restrictions in showing the truth of the Holocaust in a film? (e.g., depicting the death in the gas chamber)*

The Holocaust in history films is usually depicted in scenes of the persecution, isolation and roundup of Jews; the mass killings tend to be depicted using Holocaust iconography and symbols. However, several films depict gruesome scenes of Jewish men, women and children being shot, beaten to death or burned alive. The cinematic

representation of death in the gas chambers is an accepted taboo in filmmaking (SCHAAR; OGASA 2015: 73), but it was violated in *The Grey Zone*.

The authors wanted to know how Malaysian students, whose cinematic experience had been largely shaped by US, Chinese, Korean and Japanese films, dealt with this sensitive issue. The answers were very controversial – some responses were rather curious – so they are given space here to present them.

Six students (out of 21 = 28.5%) were clearly in favour of restrictions. They referred to “respect for the victims”, possible trauma these scenes might cause Holocaust survivors (or their descendants) and sensitive viewers. Other creative cinematic means “such as explicit scenes of violence, such as the agonising death in a gas chamber” (NH) are available to filmmakers to refer to mass murder (e.g., trains), since the fate of the Jews is well known. NR argued “that the Germans will carry the blame for generations”, and she “fears a reaction of vengeance by today’s Jews which might lead to WW III”.

15 students (71.5%) are against any restrictions. They argued that in order to understand, remember and “feel” more deeply an almost unimaginable event like the Holocaust, the whole process should be shown, including the killing of Jews in all its forms (shooting, gassing). Several students referred to the uniqueness of this crime and to the educational need to “show the whole truth”, as scenes of exceptional cruelty will stay in the mind of the viewers and will make them aware “that it will never happen again” (NR).

NR and FS argue that it is important for people to know the truth, regardless of how cruel or horrifying it may be. They believe that showing the reality of the gas chambers helps to understand the magnitude of the crime committed against the Jews.

LYW and YQL share the view that there should be no restrictions on portraying the events of the Holocaust. They emphasize the importance of depicting all aspects, including the suffering and death in the gas chambers, in order to provide a complete and impactful educational experience.

AL, IH, and TSH express curiosity about the mechanics of the gas chambers and the reactions of the victims. They believe that films should show the reality of the gas chambers and the experiences of both the victims and the perpetrators, aiming to understand the motivations and behaviours involved.

AS highlights the emotional impact that depicting the killings can have on viewers, and expresses a desire to know the details of how the gas chambers operated and how the Jews realized their fate upon entering the extermination camps.

WQW believes that the horror of the gas chambers should be shown in Holocaust films, not to promote hatred, but to teach an important lesson and to reveal the extent of the Nazis' efforts to eliminate evidence of their crimes.

Overall, the responses support the idea that a comprehensive portrayal of the Holocaust, including the gas chambers, is necessary for educational purposes and historical accuracy. These statements may give the impression that many students were emotionally numb when they demanded that death in the gas chamber be shown. The authors would like to qualify this impression, as many scenes in the film elicited verbal expressions of horror and disgust, and responses to other questions showed that the film made a deep and lasting impression. The majority of respondents were (young) women, who according to a “[...] large-scale study by a research team from the University of Basel on the connection between emotions, memory performance and brain activation according to gender” rate emotional images more emotionally and remember them better than men (SPALEK 2015).<sup>12</sup> A certain obsession with the ‘full truth’, often expressed in discussions about the pros and cons of using documentaries or fictional films to visualise historical events, has certainly led to a demand for the unvarnished truth to be shown, no matter how gruesome. The subsequent discussion of the film, based on the students’ responses, debated this controversial issue and the different points of view, leading to an open exchange and in-depth argumentation of both opinions.

#### 9) *Character analysis* (HE/PR)

Historical empathy is an emotional and psychological skill that requires the observer to recognise and respect potentially alien perspectives. “Perspective recognition involves a rational examination of past perspectives that explains historical actions in terms of the attitudes, beliefs, and intentions of people in the past” (METZGER 2007).

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<sup>12</sup> With the help of data from 3398 test subjects from four sub-studies, the scientists were able to prove that women rated emotional image content - and negative content in particular - as more emotional than the male study participants. See SPALEK, Klara, et al. Sex-Dependent Dissociation between Emotional Appraisal and Memory: A Large-Scale Behavioral and fMRI Study. *In: Journal of Neuroscience* (2015) Available at <<https://www.unibas.ch/de/Aktuell/News/Uni-Research/M-nner-und-Frauen-verarbeiten-Emotionen-unterschiedlich>> Accessed on 21.09.2022.

The *SK* can be seen as a composite character, whose inner conflicts and struggle for survival have already been well elaborated and described by the students. The analysis of the two main secondary characters, on the other hand, was difficult because almost nothing about their past was revealed in the film.

The audience meets Dr. Nyiszli<sup>13</sup> as a pathologist whose work was obviously highly valued by the SS doctor Dr Mengele. Nyiszli wanted nothing to do with the *SK* and was against any form of resistance, as the safety of his wife and child in Camp C, which was about to be liquidated, was his main concern. In exchange for (very little) information about the planned uprising, he persuaded SS *Oberscharführer* Muhsfeldt to transfer his wife and daughter to a safer work detail. Despite his reservations, Nyiszli revived the girl who had survived the gassing (played by Kamelia Grigorova) and made Muhsfeldt promise to protect her. After the uprising was crushed, he continued his gruesome work.

*How did the students describe Dr. Nyiszli based on the film?*

Three students (14.2%) described Dr Nyiszli (played by Allan Corduner) superficially as a positive character, without even mentioning his role as collaborator and informer: “a very kind doctor who helps those in need” (LKQ), “kind, helps to cure people, does it for his family” (NAn), “good man who saves the girl, makes a deal with Muhsfeldt to save the girl” (NAf).

17 students (81%) tried to work out his conflicts, his “moral grey area” (“torn between his duty as a doctor, trusted by the Nazis, and his Jewish heritage, wanting to

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<sup>13</sup> **Dr. Miklos Nyiszli** (June 17, 1901 – May 5, 1956), his wife and daughter were sent to Auschwitz in June 1944. Nyiszli volunteered to be a doctor and he treated sick prisoners in the concentration camp part. Josef Mengele, the SS physician noticed Nyiszli’s skills as surgeon and placed him in an autopsy center inside Crematorium II, where also the 12<sup>th</sup> *SK* was housed. In his book *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account* (New York: Arcade Publishing), he confessed to have been a collaborator by assisting Mengele in inhuman medical experiments on fellow Jews, especially children, twins and “dwarfs”. He carried out autopsies and prepared skeletons for anthropological collections. He witnessed the killing of tens of thousands of people. Despite being “[...] appalled by the disregard for human life and lack of sympathy for human suffering shown by the SS guards and officers”, Nyiszli continued “[...]to perform what he considered immoral acts”. “One day, after the gassing of a new shipment of prisoners, Nyiszli was summoned by prisoners working in the gas chambers who had found a girl alive under a mass of bodies in a gas chamber. Nyiszli and his fellow prisoners did their best to help and care for the girl but she was eventually discovered by SS guards and shot”. [This incident was dramatized also in the film *Son of Saul*, Hungary 2015 directed by László Nemes T.S.] He bribed an SS officer to have his wife and daughter transferred to a women’s work camp, where there was less danger of being killed. Nyiszli remained in Auschwitz until January 18, when he was forced on a death march that took him to Mauthausen and Melk concentration camps in Austria. He was liberated in Melk by US troops on May 5, 1945. His wife and daughter also survived and were liberated from Bergen-Belsen. See Miklós\_Nyiszli. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miklós\\_Nyiszli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miklós_Nyiszli)> Accessed on 11.09.2022.

help other Jews but also to save his family” YQL). Several noted that although N. was an excellent doctor and pathologist, he hated the work he was forced to do, but continued to do quality work for Mengele (of which he was also very proud) in order to stay alive and keep his family safe. It was observed that N. avoided all situations that would endanger him by refusing to support the uprising. Instead, he betrayed his fellow Jews and offered information to the Muhsfeldt. During the uprising he hid under a table. N. is therefore characterised by TSH and AL as “selfish” and “a coward who wants to survive at all costs”. NF mentioned that he “worked hard to save the gassed girl and even threatened Muhsfeldt to report him to Mengele because he was incapable of saving her”. LYW pointed out that he was “human enough to help the girl, but not selfless enough to fight for the cause of the SK. His priority is the safety of his family”. NN expressed disappointment “that he let the girl be killed and did not sacrifice himself”. TPJ described N. as “mentally tortured” while enjoying certain privileges. NH has mostly negative words for him:

“I would describe Dr. Nyiszli as an empathetic and as a self-interested man. His empathetic side is shown for his care for the Jewish girl who he is willing to save. Being a father of a daughter, this sense of empathy comes naturally. However, the fact that he was a doctor who experimented on the Jews, doesn’t leave me with the impression that he is good. Although he was empathetic, I did not see him as a good man. I see him as a man who’s good at taking advantages of things. For example, being stunned by the fact that the girl survived, I believe he saw that as a chance for another experiment. He asked the Sonderkommando who founded her, “How was she lying.” To me, it was probably to help his own personal research on how did the girl survived instead of checking onto the girl’s condition. In the end, I was convinced that he was not good at all. He saw the Jewish girl, and left her to be shot by SS Oberscharführer Erich Mußfeldt”.

*SS Oberscharführer Erich Muhsfeldt*<sup>14</sup> (played by Harvey Keitel) is the SS officer responsible for the smooth running of the mass killings in the gas chamber/crematorium complex. He is portrayed as clearly disturbed by what he sees as his dutiful contribution to the “Final Solution”, even though it had turned him into an alcoholic who suffered

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<sup>14</sup> *SS Oberscharführer Erich Muhsfeldt* (18 February 1913 – 28 January 1948) served in Majdanek and Auschwitz extermination camps participating in and supervising mass killings of Jews. “He was involved in the final mass shooting of the camp's remaining Jewish inmates known as the Operation Harvest Festival or ‘Erntefest’. It was the largest single-day, single-camp massacre of the Holocaust, totalling 43,000 in three nearby locations. When the Majdanek camp was liquidated, he transferred back to Auschwitz, where he then served as supervising SS officer of the Jewish Sonderkommando in Crematorium II and III in Auschwitz II (Birkenau)... After the war had ended, Muhsfeldt was arrested and charged by the War Crimes Group, European Command initially. He was retried in Kraków by the Supreme National Tribunal in 1947, where he was sentenced to death for his war crimes. He was executed by hanging on 28 January 1948”. See Erich Muhsfeldt. Available at: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich\\_Muhsfeldt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Muhsfeldt)> Accessed on 11.09.2022.

from constant headaches. He seemed to be disgusted by the actions of the *SK* (which he forced them to do!) and regarded them as traitors to their own people. He remarked: “I never fully despised the Jews until I experienced how easily they could be persuaded to do the work here. To do it so well. And to their own people!” (Scenes from the movie). He helped Dr Nyiszli transfer his wife and daughter in exchange for information about the planned uprising. He also expressed this attitude towards the genocide he was a part of after shooting *SK* Abramowics (played by Steve Buscemi), fully aware that the war was lost: “That is how it will go for all of us. First you, then us. The last thing to do is smile. We will dispose of as many of you as we can before they do the same to us. Your bombers only speed it all up!” Muhsfeldt discovered the girl who had survived the gassing and assured Nyiszli of his protection. In the final scene, however, he made the girl watch the execution of the *SK* and shot her as she ran towards “freedom”<sup>15</sup>.

*How did the students describe Erich Muhsfeldt based on the film?*

Muhsfeldt was described by many students as “German soldier” and “SS officer” respectively who oversaw the killing process (mentioning of his function) and who “is at home in the death camp” (absence of a real home) with just a variety of positive adjectives such as “loyal”, “dutiful”, “cunning”, “intelligent”, “sharp”, “true to his word” and negative adjectives: “brutal”, “heartless”, “cruel”, “inhumane”, “totally bad”. Several students pointed out that he had no sympathies for the Jews, that he forced the girl to watch the execution of the *SK* and that he killed the girl in cold blood<sup>16</sup>. It was also often mentioned that Muhsfeldt was an alcoholic who suffered from constant headaches, and that he used Dr. Nyiszli to provide information about the *SK*'s planned activities. The fact that Muhsfeldt did indeed protect the doctor's family (even at personal risk) was highly

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<sup>15</sup> The scene was changed for dramatic purposes: “Nyiszli described an exceedingly rare occurrence, in which an inmate girl of 16, due to highly unusual circumstances, managed to survive the gas chamber and, with medical help from Nyiszli and others after she was discovered alive, was partially recovering. Nyiszli took up her case with Muhsfeldt asking that her life be spared: “These were my arguments, and I asked him to do something for the child. He listened to me attentively then asked me exactly what I proposed doing. I saw by his expression that I had put him face to face with a practically impossible problem.” Muhsfeldt replied “There's no way of getting round it, the child will have to die.” Nyiszli explains that “Half an hour later the young girl was led, or rather carried, into the furnace room hallway, and there [Muhsfeldt] sent another in his place to do the job. A bullet in the back of the neck...” Erich Muhsfeldt. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich\\_Muhsfeldt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Muhsfeldt).

<sup>16</sup> In contrast, NAF wrote: „He is not so evil, but a fragile character and a strict officer: He did not commit horrible things except shooting the guy who talks so much and the girl. He has health problems!”.

appreciated by the students, who also value qualities such as loyalty and duty (patriotic education plays an important role in Malaysia). Supervising the mass killing in the gas chamber was even considered his duty, to which he was bound by his oath. NH wrote:

*“SS Oberscharführer Erich Muhsfeldt appears to be a man who is true to his words. He made a pact with Dr Nyiszli that he will save his family from the death camps, and he kept his words. He mentioned: ‘I spoke with Dr Mengele and assured him that you had nothing to do with any of this. That you knew and did nothing. You will continue with your work.’ I look at him as a wise character. Although from watching the movie, I’m supposed to oppose the violence he was doing but the fact that he was bad from the beginning until the end and not vice versa, made it okay. Muhsfeldt did not betray anyone. He did what he had to do, he took an oath to protect his country and what did his job as an SS. Although he let her go, he shot her to her death anyways in the end. When he made a deal with Dr. Nyiszli and kept his promise. He says: ‘We will both continue with our work. Because that’s what the living do. We will have saved each other then. We needn’t save anyone else’.”*

Only NiK provided a slightly deeper insight into Muhsfeldt:

*“... He is relentless and managed to get the doctor to spill the secrets by twisting sentences and meanings. He gets the last word in every conversation. Muhsfeldt kills on several occasions, but deep down he knows about his wrongdoing. He drinks constantly, is suffering from headaches and stress. He accepted his fate, not only Jews will die, but he himself as well. He realized the horrors the Nazis committed but continued his duty.”*

The answers show a general tendency towards a rather one-dimensional characterisation of historical figures or fictional characters, with many students often just giving a brief description of what they saw on the screen, without really exploring the characters' motives for certain actions (*e.g.*, through their own research). According to Barton & Levstik (2004: 209-210), there are five elements that need to be developed in order to prepare for perspective analysis: “[...]a sense of ‘otherness’, shared ‘normalcy’, historical contextualisation, differentiation of perspectives and contextualisation of the present”. Key factors in developing PR in the classroom are “time”, “practice and careful mentoring”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> With regard to the history film project as a whole, Schaar (2022: 61-62) concludes: “When given the necessary guidance and tools (HLC, viewing questions), however, they [the BA German students] were able to (more) critically examine and actively deal with content, narrative and perspectives presented in the films. Passive spectators turned into motivated, interested, actively involved inquirers. Most participants found history films as teaching tools particularly engaging and useful for contextualization, as opportunities for in-depth discussions and for study purposes. [...] The movies which elicited the strongest emotional responses but also proved to be rather challenging when analysing HE/PR were the Holocaust-themed *The Grey Zone* and *The Pianist*”.

## 5 Final Remarks

According to the authors, the teaching of the Holocaust as part of the history of National Socialism and the Second World War was successful overall, not least because of the use of international feature films. The history film project was characterised as an honest – no taboos – confrontation with the darkest chapter of German history and was judged very positively overall, although some criticism was voiced about the scope of the work, the selection process of the films and the time constraints. For the first time, the students experienced on film – through selected fates – the industrial mass murder of Europe's Jews during the Second World War, many aspects of the Nazi persecution of Jews, the suffering in ghettos and concentration camps, acts of unspeakable brutality, bravery and love, cowardice, betrayal and desperate attempts to survive. Through the film project, the students not only learnt about the facts and actors of the Holocaust and how to analyse its cinematic representation, but they also had the opportunity to think about and express their opinions on controversial choices of characters and themes – without the socially desirable guidelines of the lecturer. Finally, the students were informed about different forms of Holocaust remembrance, in particular the Yad Vashem memorial in Israel and the honouring of active helpers of the Jews as “Righteous Among the Nations”. The controversial issue of Jews who helped other Jews (*e.g.*, Walter Süskind) and Muslims who saved Jews from extermination (*e.g.*, the Imam of the Great Mosque in Paris or King Mohamed V of Morocco) not being honoured by Yad Vashem was also discussed.

Reservations about the Holocaust in the classroom, which were to be expected to some extent, were not at all apparent; most BA German students were willing to actively engage with the Nazi regime and the Holocaust as they would with any other topic in the course (even if only to get good grades). However, many students (both female and male) developed and showed genuine interest and emotional involvement during the film project. The fact that the film project led to a rethinking and a differentiated view of the Holocaust, at least for some students, can be seen from these unedited quotations:

- Nsh: “I changed my mind about the Holocaust. I considered it a crime, but not the greatest crime in human history. After watching the film, I believe that it actually was the greatest crime in human history because of it being an organized killing programme”.

- AL: “It is the cruellest murder of innocent people I have ever witnessed on screen!”.
- NNa: “*The Grey Zone* and *The Pianist* had quite an impact on me. Before watching the films and learning about the Holocaust, I was against the Jews for the Israeli-Palestine conflict. But after watching the films, I actually felt sorry for the Jews and for the horror they had to live throughout the Holocaust. The Holocaust was just Millions of mostly innocent Jews being exterminated thanks to one man’s hatred towards the ethnic. In a way, I was affected, and I no longer agree with Hitler to exterminate them back in those days”

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