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FULL COMMENT

Avi Benlolo: Hitler and imagery, evil that still sells

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I am standing in front of one of the newest exhibits at the German Historical Museum, trying to understand why I feel so deeply troubled. Titled “Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime,” it is the first official exhibition in Berlin to focus on Hitler’s fascist ideology and his effect on the German people.

The exhibit is an outstanding presentation of rarely seen imagery, propaganda and documents that catapulted Adolph Hitler to power. It is a sharp display of a horrific marketing machine that turned Hitler from an ordinary street thug into a folksy super leader. Posters of proper Aryan men, women and children stand in contrast to Hitler’s own appearance; for Germans of the time, his looks were irrelevant.

The exhibit shows how Hitler was portrayed as the ultimate statesman as he addressed thousands of well-dressed Germans at rallies; photographs reveal a leader loved, almost worshipped by the people he lead down a path of unimaginable evil. On display are Nazi uniforms, hats, knives, pins and flags – the kind of memorabilia easily purchased on eBay these days. Several versions of Mein Kampf were displayed – sealed in a glass case, of course, because the book is illegal to purchase in Germany. When probed, our guide informed us the book can be acquired by other means.

So I ask myself, why do I feel so uneasy? Perhaps because I’m concerned that many of the people visiting this temporary exhibit will not interpret it in the way it was intended. For me, the exhibit is a demonstration of a sick society that rose to power along with the criminal mind it venerated.

But what will it mean to thousands of others who may not be intimately familiar with the Holocaust? Will it be, to some, a glorification of Hitler? As our guide noted when talking about German pop culture, Hitler sells. Hitler still sells because people are fascinated by him and the iconic imagery of the Nazis. This is not a trivial concern: the idea of creating an exhibit similar to “Hitler and the Germans” was dismissed by Museum officials several years ago for exactly this reason.

My travelling companions advise giving people the benefit of the doubt, arguing that Hitler has come to embody the idea of evil and the point the Museum is making is a fairly obvious one. This is true – despite what I believe is insufficient evidence about the devastation and tragedy wrought by this common little man; the information is presented almost without context. In a world filled with increasing Holocaust denial, context seems so very significant.

Is it out of context in Berlin which has a prominent Holocaust monument, a Jewish Museum, an outdoor Holocaust Exhibit as well as the German Historical Museum (where this exhibit is being held) which deals with the Holocaust? I’m not sure, although I would hope anyone living in or visiting Berlin will have been exposed to Holocaust education at some point.

As for the exhibit itself, I am thankful the curators included the word “crime” in the title.

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Avi Belolo, President and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, is currently leading a group of community leaders to visit the sites of the Holocaust in Germany and Poland. These are his thoughts upon visiting a new German exhibition dedicated to understanding how Hitler and the Nazis rose to power.

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