

Operation Finale: A Terrific Film on the Capture of Eichmann

The mission that brought this pathetic little creep to justice was a remarkable achievement by Israel.



by Bruce Bawer

I hadn't heard of the 2018 film *Operation Finale* until the other night, when I was scrolling through the offerings on Netflix in search of something that might not be utter rubbish.

After pondering a few other options, I decided to watch this film, written by Matthew Orton and directed by Chris Weitz (*About a Boy*), because it's about the 1960 Israeli kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann in Argentina – an exciting topic – and

because Eichmann is played by the great Sir Ben Kingsley, who starred in *Schindler's List* (1993) and won an Oscar for *Gandhi* (1982). How bad could it be?

Then again, the movie came out four years ago. Why hadn't I heard of it before? That year's Academy Award for Best Picture, after all, went to *Green Book*, which was – well – OK, with the other nominated films including *Black Panther*, *BlacKkKlansman*, Lady Gaga's *A Star Is Born*, and the Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Not exactly a stellar lineup. Kingsley hadn't even picked up an Oscar nod for Supporting Actor. Which raised the question: how *good* could it be?

Brief answer: it's terrific. I expected to fall asleep to it; instead I was – no pun intended – captivated.

The first thing to know about *Operation Finale* is that it was very different from *Operation Entebbe* in 1976 (the story of which has itself been told in a number of films). After Palestinians hijacked an Air France flight that had left Tel Aviv en route to Paris and rerouted it to Uganda (where Idi Amin welcomed them), the IDF flew in 100 commandos, who killed all the hijackers – plus 45 Ugandan soldiers – and rescued 106 hostages. (Famously, the one commando who perished in the operation was Yonatan Netanyahu, Bibi's brother.)

By contrast, when the Israeli government received confirmation that Eichmann – the SS officer who, more than anyone else other than Hitler himself, was identified with the formulation and implementation of the Final Solution – was in fact living in Buenos Aires, sending in a fleet of military aircraft wasn't an option. Nor was a request for extradition: Argentina protected its Nazis. One chilling sequence in *Operation Finale* depicts a meeting of well-heeled hardcore Nazis, complete with lusty cries of "Heil Hitler!" and exterminationist rhetoric about Jews. The sobering takeaway: Nazis, at that time, formed a not insignificant part of

Argentina's social elite and were impatient to enlarge their political influence.

And who was their No. 1 domestic idol? None other than Eichmann, who lived under an alias and had a humble factory job but who, from time to time, would emerge from obscurity to address his local fans (an activity that's also dramatized in the movie).

In any case, Argentina wasn't Uganda. Israel wasn't in a position to swoop down with a fleet of planes, overpower the local military and gendarmerie, and drag Eichmann off against the will of the local authorities. A clandestine scheme was called for. So several Mossad operatives, flying on the fake passports of several different countries, traveled to Argentina by a wide range of routes and met in a safe house in Buenos Aires.

Their first order of business was to stake out Eichmann's house in order to ensure that they had the right man. That accomplished, they established his daily routine in meticulous detail. And then they grabbed him on the way home from work. The next step in the plan was to spirit him out of the country on a special flight that had been arranged in secret consultations with El Al. But now airline officials came with a staggering new demand: they wouldn't fly Eichmann to Israel unless he signed a document agreeing to face trial in the Jewish state.

The most dramatic part of the movie covers the subsequent few days, during which the Israeli team keeps Eichmann under lock and key while trying to get his John Hancock. Of all the Israelis, Peter Malkin (Oscar Isaac) is the one who's most palpably repulsed by Eichmann – but also, in a weird way, drawn to him. While Malkin is taking his turn feeding and shaving and guarding Eichmann, the old Nazi opens him up. Whom did *he* lose in the Holocaust? At first, Malkin resists intimate contact. Then he starts to break down, showing

Eichmann a picture of his beloved sister, who died in the Holocaust with her infant son. Eichmann acts as if he's sympathetic.

For a while there, you get the feeling that the film is humanizing this monster. He's a feeble old man whose wife (Greta Scacchi) and son (Joe Alwyn) adore him. He seems to regret his role in the Nazi murder machine. But no need to worry. Eventually, the mask comes off – and when it does, boy, is it one hell of a great cinematic moment. You find yourself wondering why Kingsley didn't get, at the very least, an Oscar nomination. Isaac, too. Easily the best scenes in this film are the ones between them. There's no melodrama, no hype, nothing that feels fake or exaggerated. It's just two men in a room, enemies to the core, brought together in a unique, intense situation. It's absolutely riveting.

Kingsley and Isaac are backed up by a solid supporting cast. Plus a writer, director, and editor (Pamela Martin) who do a magnificent job of creating and sustaining suspense even though the denouement is never in doubt. After having seen a number of lavishly expensive new movies lately, with armies of extras and plenty of up-to-date special effects, it was deeply satisfying to watch a movie, rooted in character and with a solidly structured narrative, that could have been made in pretty much the same way half a century ago.

Yes, at times one can feel as if there are too many movies and documentaries about the Nazis – as if we need to be told constantly that they were evil – especially given how few there are about the evils of Communism.

But I'm very glad that this movie was made. I was surprised by how much it got to me. After seeing it, moreover, I found myself more irate than ever, perhaps, over the demonization of Israel in Western news and entertainment. The operation that brought this pathetic little creep to justice (it was Eichmann's trial, of course, that led Hannah Arendt to coin

the phrase “the banality of evil”) was just one chapter in the very remarkable history of a very remarkable nation. But thanks to media propaganda, and the appalling historical ignorance of the general public (especially the young), Israel-hatred is on the rise. Which is nothing less than an outrage, given that that nation’s story is one of well-nigh unrivaled righteousness, industry, technical achievement, and courage – virtues exemplified, not least, by the valiant operatives whose heroic exploits are so skillfully recounted in this first-rate film.

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