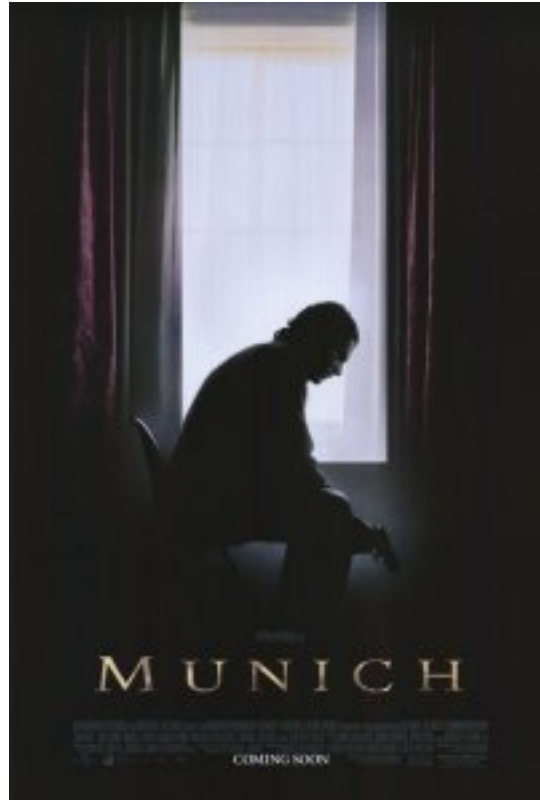


Munich

A Discussion Guide on Terrorism and Peacemaking



Movie Web Site:

<http://www.munichmovie.com/>

Release Date in United States and Canada: Dec. 23, 2005

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Background

On September 5, 1972, eight Palestinian terrorists who were part of the “Black September” organization infiltrated Olympic Village in Munich, Germany. They took 11 Israeli athletes hostage, killing two almost immediately.

As the terrorists negotiated with German officials for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, they continued to hold the Israeli athletes hostage.

Television networks already had reporters and camera crews in place to cover the Olympic Games, allowing much of the world to watch these events unfold in what became the first live televised terrorist attack. Reporters including ABC Sports’ Jim McKay, ABC News’ Peter Jennings and ITN’s Gerald Seymour provided ongoing coverage.

Their demands unmet, the terrorists hoped to leave the country with their hostages. German authorities intervened and attempted to rescue the Israelis, thwarting the Palestinians’ escape. The rescue attempt failed, however, and the nine athletes, a German police officer and five of the terrorists were killed.

German authorities held the three surviving terrorists for more than a month but released them after more Palestinian terrorists hijacked a Lufthansa jet.

In a counter-terrorist move, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir instructed agents of Israel’s intelligence agency, known as Mossad, to find and destroy the terrorists responsible for the Munich attack.

Why This Movie Matters to People of Faith

Academy Award-winning filmmaker Steven Spielberg called the Munich attack and the Israeli response “a defining moment in the modern history of the Middle East.”



“Hindsight into such historic events is easy,” he said. “What’s not so easy is to try to see things as they must have looked to people at the time. Viewing Israel’s response to Munich through the eyes of the men who were sent to avenge that tragedy adds a human dimension to a horrific episode that we

usually think about only in political or military terms. By experiencing how the implacable resolve of these men to succeed in their mission slowly gave way to troubling doubts about what they were doing, I think we can learn something important about the tragic stand-off we find ourselves in today.”

Spielberg's film, with a December 23, 2005 scheduled release, focuses on the aftermath of the Munich attacks, following the Mossad agents assigned to track down and assassinate the 11 Palestinians thought to be behind the attack at the Olympic Games.

According to advance word of mouth and statements by Spielberg, one of the movie's themes explores the usefulness of vengeance and the "eye for an eye" philosophy.

Jesus completely overturned this approach, calling instead for his followers to be peacemakers. Nevertheless, many people who claim to follow Jesus still support that "eye for eye" philosophy, variously calling it justice or part of a policy of self-preservation.

"Munich" goes to the heart of this thorny issue.

More About the Movie and Controversy

Steven Spielberg began principal photography for "Munich" in Malta in June 2005. He completed it by early December on an amazingly fast production and post-production schedule, even by his own standards (Spielberg is known for shooting quickly and on-budget).



Criticism of the film began even prior to shooting, when it became known that *Vengeance*, a book by George Jonas, was a pivotal source for the movie.

In *Vengeance*, Jonas tells the story of "Avner," a man who claims to have been the leader of the Israeli squad tasked with hunting down the Palestinian terrorists responsible for the Munich attack. The book details hit after hit and the toll such activities took on Avner and his counter-terrorist team.

In the book's preface, Jonas said he corroborated Avner's story in a variety of other ways, verifying details as he could on his own, as well as talking to other people. Jonas, as a matter of fact, still stands by his story.

Some time after the book was released, "Avner" was alleged to have been Yuval Aviv, an intelligence expert who works in New York City. Neither Aviv nor Jonas has ever commented on whether Aviv is Avner.

Others, however, find *Vengeance* virtually a work of fiction. Zvi Zamir, former head of Mossad (Israel's intelligence agency), said he's never heard of Aviv and

that the story of Avner as told in *Vengeance* is false. Others in Israel's intelligence community have disputed the book.



Thus, Spielberg's movie, crediting *Vengeance* as a source, comes with built-in controversy. The movie is also a lightning rod because Spielberg portrays the Israelis charged with hunting down and killing the Palestinians as having doubts about their mission.

In a press release in July, Spielberg said "the implacable resolve" of members of the counter-terrorist team "slowly gave way to troubling doubts about what they were doing."

Many observers immediately had trouble with Spielberg's reference to "troubling doubts." In their thinking, Israel was justified in its response, and at no point in the counter-terrorist initiative did "troubling doubts" ever arise. (To this day, Israel has never formally accepted responsibility for the deaths of 10 Palestinian terrorists who were killed in a variety of scenarios, including gunfire and booby-traps.)

Now that the film has had advance screenings across the globe, more substantiated opinions have been coming in. *Time* movie critic Richard Schickel calls the film "a very good movie," and Fox News calls "Munich" the "best movie of 2005."

Others, however, aren't buying it. Ehud Danoch, Consul General of Israel in Los Angeles, says the film incorrectly draws moral equivalency between the Black September terrorists and the Mossad agents responsible for the reprisals. Author Jack Engelhard concludes that "Spielberg is no friend of Israel."

Spielberg is of course the director of "Schindler's List," which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1994. That film, based on a book by Thomas Keneally, tells the story of Oskar Schindler, a gentile who uses his position in the Nazi party to save more than 1,000 Jews from extermination during World War II. After that film, Spielberg founded the Shoah Project, which archives testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

Some critics say that while Spielberg may be pro-Jewish, he is not pro-Israel, and they're already pointing to "Munich" as exhibit A in that argument. Though Spielberg has said very little publicly about this film, he has said that he supports Israel's right to defend itself.

Spielberg has also commented (see his statement quoted earlier) that he hopes issues raised in "Munich" will help contemporaries find a pathway through the

violence that still plagues the world. Thus, some viewers see the movie as Spielberg's commentary on the war on terror, which further ignites opinion about the film.

As Ivor Davis wrote in an article for the *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, "The subject matter virtually guarantees that the film will satisfy almost no one with deep feelings about the subject or the politics of the Middle East."



Discussion Questions

The filmmakers call this movie a “dramatic exploration inspired by true events.” Do you care how “accurate” this portrayal may be? Are you bothered by the fact that the book (*Vengeance*) on which the movie is based has been criticized for relying on a questionable source?

In the movie, Prime Minister Golda Meir says, “Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate the compromises with its own values.” What does she mean? Do you agree with that statement?

Do you think Steven Spielberg is implying that Israel’s counter-terrorist initiative was a mistake?

Are revenge, retribution and counter-terrorist attacks ever good ideas? Can they be forms of justice? How?

Are vengeful attacks ethical? Do they ever resolve anything?

How should followers of Jesus respond if their understanding of the pathway to peace varies sharply from public opinion or governmental policy?

Does counter-terrorism stop terrorism or further encourage it?

What is a response to acts of wanton savagery? What is a Christian response?

Read Matthew 5:38-42. What did Jesus say about retaliatory violence?

Is Jesus’ command to resist evil limited to passive resistance? Was his command to go a second mile (Matthew 5:41), when a hated Roman soldier forced a Jew to carry his military pack, a way to transform the relationship between an occupying oppressor and the oppressed?

What evidence do you find in Matthew 5:39-42 that Jesus expects us to take positive actions in the interest of the aggressor?

Read Matthew 5:43-48. Do you agree that love of God and love of neighbor form the basis upon which we understand and interpret all of Jesus’ other commands?

Is Jesus’ command to love everyone, even enemies, abstract or concrete?

Do we sometimes make Jesus’ transforming initiatives of peacemaking private, personal and individual matters as a way to justify state-sponsored violence? Wasn’t Jesus’ teaching aimed at transforming social relationships between Jews and Samaritans (Luke 10:33-37), enemies within communities (Matthew 7:4) and Romans and Jews (Matthew 5:41)?

How can we simultaneously protect the weak and oppressed, pursue justice, resist evil and demonstrate love to enemies and aggressors?

Additional Resources

EthicsDaily.com has been covering Steven Spielberg's "Munich" since the summer of 2005. Coverage has included reviews of relevant books, movies and documentaries, as well as articles about the controversy.

Full-text articles and reviews are available free of charge at the links below:

'Munich' Takes Early Criticism Despite Attempted Low Profile (Dec. 5, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=6649

This article looks at some of the criticism of the movie.

'One Day in September' (August 11, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=6143

A review of the book, *One Day in September*, published in 2000 to coincide with the release of the documentary of the same name. The book is by terrorism expert Simon Reeve and provides ample detail about the Munich attack and its aftermath.

Title for Spielberg's Film Hopes to Quell Controversy (July 27, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=6071

The movie, at least publicly, had no title for months. This story covers the announcement of the movie's title, "Munich."

'One Day in September' (July 21, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=6050

This is a review of the award-winning documentary, which uses television footage, interviews, photographs and more in its gripping account of the attack on the Israeli athletes.

'Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team' (July 12, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=6006

This is a review of the book by George Jonas that serves as the basis for Spielberg's film. The book is especially notable given the fact that its source—a man named Avner—has been discredited by many officials. Author Jonas stands by his account.

'Sword of Gideon' (June 29, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5950

Two years after Jonas' book was published, HBO produced a TV movie about the Israeli counter-terrorist team using Jonas' book as its source as well. Here we review that HBO movie.

Spielberg Making Film About 1972 Munich Attack (June 27, 2005)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5938

This is our first story about Spielberg making the film.