

Re-Reading Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* as A Historical Fiction on Nazi Regime

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This paper is an attempt to demonstrate the extent of historical accuracy in the depiction of fictional events during the Nazi regime in the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. The research aims to interrogate the historicity of this historical fiction. Despite the text's categorization as historical fiction, critics have questioned the credibility of its historicity - they argue that its depiction of events in the Nazi regime is excessively idealistic for historical fiction hence, can only be read as historical fantasy, for its incorporation of fantastic elements into a "realistic" narrative (Shanoes 236).

This criticism is predominantly aimed toward the description of Germans in the novel; the critics question the amicability of German characters in the text toward Jews as being dismissive of the consequences of protecting them. Additionally, the metaphorical description of death, its portrayal as a poetic moment, is considered as a disregard for its brutality. However, some critics have contested this statement and cite historical documentation of Germans rescuing Jews; hence, the plot is not entirely fantastical. In Death's description, the omniscient narrator displays sentimental values, serving as the humanistic voice against the harsh historical

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setting of the text with its wry humour. This paper argues that the text contains numerous historical references to events and characters from the Nazi regime, hence could be considered as historical fiction.

The text refers to the imprisonment of communists during Hitler's rise into power in 1930s Germany - "Communism was considered as antithetical to Nazism because it prioritized class above nation and race. Nazi concentration camps were opened to imprison political opponents of the Nazi regime; the first prisoners were German communists" (USHMM). The *Book Thief* is set in the latter part of the 1930s, where the protagonist is a German girl whose father is incarcerated in a concentration camp owing to his communist ideals. Moreover, the Nazi party's propaganda against the communists is also revealed during a speech at the beginning of the novel - "'We put an end to the disease which has been spread through Germany for the last twenty years, if not more!' ... Warning the crowd to be watchful, to be vigilant, to seek out and destroy the evil machinations plotting to infect the motherland with its deplorable ways. 'The immoral! The *Kommunisten!*'" (Zusak 119). Another historical reference is the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen* or United German Girls, "the league of BDM was the female section of the Hitler Youth that began in 1930, and its objectives were to develop girls into women who were dedicated to Nazism, dutiful housewives and mothers.

Another main function of the league is the indoctrination of Nazi ideals into German minds at an early age. In 1939, when the story is set, it was made mandatory for girls aged 10 to 14 to be in the BDM" (USHMM). Liesel, being a nine-year-old, is enrolled in the junior division where they are taught to "march straight, roll bandages and sew up clothes.... At the BDM, they had been told that Germany was the superior race, but no one else in particular had been mentioned. Of course, everyone knew about the Jews, as they were the main *offenders* regarding violating the German ideal" (Zusak 41,120).

Almost immediately upon assuming the Chancellorship of Germany, Hitler began promulgating legal actions against Germany's Jews, including segregation of the Jewish population in Germany and openly discriminatory activities such as boycotting Jewish shops and deprivation of German

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citizenship. There were also laws passed restricting Jewish economic activity and occupational opportunities. (Jewish Virtual Library)

During the Third Reich, "yellow badges served to mark the wearer as a religious, ethnic outsider, and often served as a badge of shame" (Ancona 23-24). The novel describes a "road of yellow stars", where the Jewish homes are painted and marked with the Star of David to segregate the residents. The houses on the road have broken windows and vandalized walls. Later in the novel, a Jewish clothing store is destroyed by several bricks near the Nazi headquarters on Munich Street as Hans Hubermann applies to join the Nazi Party - "a star colour of mustard was smeared to the door. In sloppy lettering, the words JEWISH FILTH were spilling over at their edges" (Zusak 196).

In Death's narrates narration of Max's life history, it discusses the systemic discrimination of Jews persistent prior to the Nazi regime, as his character struggles to find employment that would pay him fairly. The escalation of the biological demarcation of Jews is narrated, "Max was sacked with the rest of the Jews at the Jederman Engineering factory in '35. That was not long after the Nuremberg Laws came in, forbidding Jews to have German citizenship and Germans and Jews to intermarry" (Zusak 207).

The novel mentions the Kristallnacht or the "The Night of Broken Glass" on November 9, 1938. "It was a program against Jews carried out by SA paramilitary forces and civilians throughout Nazi Germany. The name "Crystal Night" comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets after the windows of broken glass that littered the streets after the windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings and synagogues were smashed" (USHMM). Death narrates this event as providing Max Vandenburg's moment of escape from the Nazis - "Many Jewish establishments were being surgically smashed and looted" (Zusak 208).

"Book burnings were usually carried out in a public context; the burning of books represents the element of censorship. The Nazi regime raided bookstores, libraries and publishers' warehouses to confiscate materials that were considered as dangerous or "Un-German" (ushmm). To further propagate the Nazi agenda, any piece of literature which was considered ideologically opposing the Nazi

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propaganda was burnt in Germany. In the novel, there is a mention of the book-burning event in which Liesel steals a book which is supposed to be burnt in the heap. "The Germans loved to burn things. Shops, synagogues, Reichstags, houses, personal items, slain people and of course, books" (Zusak 90). In the chapters following Hans Hubberman's application to join the Nazi party, the Gestapo pays a visit, "they searched the house, and when the Gestapo was the official secret police of Nazi Germany. They ruthlessly eliminated opposition shown towards the Nazis within Germany and its occupied territories" (Britannica). The Hubermanns and Liesel dread the NSDAP finding out about the rescue of Max in their basement because during the Nazi regime,

Jews in hiding and their protectors risked severe punishments if the Nazis captured them. In much of German-occupied Eastern Europe, such activities were deemed capital offences. In September 1942, posters were issued during mass deportations of Jews to concentration camps with the death penalty for Germans aiding the Jews who fled. (USHMM)

Hence, it makes evident the historical recordings of German individuals, families and organizations rescuing Jews attempting to hide during the Holocaust. Additionally, those in hiding depended on the Germans for social connections, finance, and food supply. Similarly, the character of Max forms a familial bond with Liesel and her father and serves as her tutor in return, making the relationship mutually reciprocating. "The existence of major events is usually well-documented and therefore considered true, but other details are overlooked in Historical fiction" (Fellowship and Fairy dust). Despite the fictionality of the characters, their lives and the town of Molching, the above-mentioned historical details in the novel make it eligible material to be considered historical fiction.

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