**A History of the 20th Century Through Feature Films**

▪ This list is designed to give some ideas of feature films that could be used to help enrich student understanding of 20th Century History. All of them are available to purchase on DVD.

▪ It is also a resource that I use to help students settle upon an independent research theme during the [ActiveHistory 20th Century Research Project](http://www.activehistory.co.uk/Miscellaneous/menus/Year_9/20th_c_overview.php).

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**Tasks**

▪ Read through this account. Highlight any words that you don’t understand. Tick off any films you have already watched. Compare your score with other members of the class.

▪ If you were required to watch THREE films from this list (in different decades) which would you choose and why?

▪ Now research each film using [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) and decide on just ONE film that you would like to watch. Be prepared to explain your choice.

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| **1900s-1910s** | The 20th Century started in earnest with the outbreak of World War One in 1914. The horror of the trenches is captured in The Trench and Beneath Hill 60, which documents the attempts of troops to detonate mines under the German army. In 1917, the Russian monarchy of Nicholas and Alexandra – discredited by military defeat and the scandalous influence of the ‘mad monk’ Rasputin - was overthrown in a communist revolution. Since Russia was an ally of Britain and France, this temporaily relieved pressure on the Kaiser. But by 1918 Lawrence of Arabia was helping the Arabs defeat Germany’s allies in the Middle East, and the arrival of American troops in France gradually destroyed the German will to fight until it became All Quiet on the Western Front. In 1918, Germany signed an armistice. |
| **1920s** | The 1920s were years of post-war turmoil. Following the Communist Revolution, Russia descended into civil war, captured in Dr. Zhivago. The American economy thrived by satisfying the world’s growing appetite for oil (There will be Blood) and cinema (Chaplin). It also provided loans to European countries for post-war reconstruction: most notably, Germany used American dollars to fuel a cultural revolution captured in cutting-edge films like Metropolis. Nevertheless, whilst economies boomed, societies fractured. In America, the Prohibition of alcohol encouraged the growth of rival gangs led by figures like Al Capone (The Untouchables, Once Upon a Time in America, Boardwalk Empire) who grew rich selling illegal liquor. In Germany too, the old forces of conservatism clashed with the devil-may-care attitude of the post-war generation – a tension embodied by the relationship between the teacher and the strip-dancer in The Blue Angel.  |
| **1930s** | These tensions boiled into outright crisis following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, an economic downturn which led to massive unemployment and social hardship in the USA (Cinderella Man, It’s a Wonderful Life, Of Mice and Men). Foreign loans were recalled, creating a World Depression. Japan, which had ironically only recently opened its doors to the world markets, was badly hit and invaded Manchuria for its resources, re-installing the former Emperor of China there as a puppet ruler (The Last Emperor). Spain, deeply divided like many countries between Fascism and Communism (Butterfly’s Tongue) suffered a brutal civil war (Land and Freedom) which ended with the victory of General Franco. Germany was thrown into an even more violent tailspin. Fear of a violent communist revolution, plus Nazi promises to end the economic crisis, helps to explain Hitler: The Rise of Evil – although the hypnotic power of charismatic leaders over vulnerable individuals and societies continues to provide important lessons for us all to consider and beware of (Die Welle, Das Experiment). This Nazi dictatorship heralded a new, dangerous period in world affairs. Hitler spent his way out of the economic depression by borrowing money and spending it on weapons which could only pay for themselves through foreign conquest. Britain, already rocked by the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 (The King’s Speech), was further concerned when Winston Churchill warned of The Gathering Storm that was edging Europe towards World War Two. Nevertheless, right up till the invasion of Poland in 1939 many people held onto the hope of keeping Hitler happy through a policy of compromise or appeasement (Glorious ’39). |
| **1940s** | World War Two began with sweeping Nazi victories across Western Europe. By 1940, France had fallen and Holland too was under Nazi occupation. Britain held out against a planned Nazi invasion by defeating the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain (The First of the Few, A Matter of Life and Death) and then enduring The Blitz (Hope and Glory). The “Final Solution” of the Jewish problem was decided at the top-secret Wannsee Conference of 1942 (Conspiracy) and the Holocaust then gathered pace in the death camps supervised by the SS (The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas). Some individuals were brave enough to stand up to these atrocities: the German industrialist Oskar Schindler produced Schindler’s List of Jewish workers ‘essential’ for his armaments factories. Other Jews went into hiding and formed hit-squads as a gesture of Defiance.The turning point in the war came with the horrific battle of Stalingrad, where hundreds of thousands of German soldiers died in the brutal Russian winter before eventually being forced to surrender. This finally broke Hitler’s hold over his people - including the German student Sophie Scholl, who put her life on the line by openly attacking Hitler’s racial and military policies, and Klaus von Stauffeberg, who unsuccessfully tried to assassinate Hitler in Operation Valkyrie.In 1944, the Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy to begin their slow but unstoppable liberation of Europe (The Longest Day; Saving Private Ryan; Band of Brothers). From the opposite direction, Soviet troops pushed into Germany and then Berlin, where Hitler retreated into his bunker and awaited his Downfall, finally committing suicide in May 1945. |
| **1950s** | The collapse of Nazi Germany and the exhaustion of Britain and France created a power vacuum in Europe that was filled by the USA and the USSR. Very quickly, tensions between these rival superpowers began to emerge in countries which had been divided into zones of occupation between them (The Third Man). These frosty relations between the USA and the USSR became a “Cold War”. The USSR’s commitment to a worldwide communist revolution pushed the USA from a position of fear to outright paranoia (The Manchurian Candidate), with the government publicly interrogating dozens of prominent figures (incuding Howard Hugest – The Aviator) whom they suspected (usually wrongly) of being secret communists. |
| **1960s** | The USA and the USSR came closest to nuclear war in 1962, during the two weeks of the Cuban Missile Crisis (Thirteen Days). The USSR ultimately agreed to remove its missile bases from Cuba, but the world was terrified at the insanity of close and how quickly it had put itself on the brink of nuclear holocaust – a situation captured in the brilliantly tragicomic Dr Strangelove.The assassination of JFK led to his replacement by Lyndon Johnson, who came to power keen to join in with the civil rights struggle (The Help, Malcolm X, When we were Kings). However, his presidency instead got bogged down by America’s growing involvement in communist-threatened Vietnam. The jungle-fighting in the far-off Vietnam War was a horrendous experience for American soldiers (Full Metal Jacket, Platoon, Hamburger Hill) and many soldiers returned home embittered (Born on the Fourth of July) and traumatised (Jacob’s Ladder, The Deer Hunter) by their experiences. |
| **1970s** | The USA withdrew from Vietnam in 1974 and in the same year President Nixon was forced to resign his position after being implicated in the Watergate Scandal: an illegal attempt to plant bugging devices in the building where members of a rival political party were based (All the President’s Men, Nixon). Nixon’s attempts to justify himself in a series of TV interviews with David Frost (Frost/Nixon) were unsuccessful.As the 1970s progressed, democratic capitalism faced a new threat: the rise of Islamic extremism. The creation of Israel in Palestine as a homeland for the long-suffering Jewish people was bitterly resented by the (mainly Muslim) Palestinian Arabs who felt forced out of their homeland. In 1972, Palestinian terrorists kidnapped and executed Israeli athletes at the Munich olympics, and in 1979 Iran went through a repressive Islamic revolution (Persepolis) which eventually even led to the American embassy in Teheran coming under siege (Argo). |
| **1980s-90s** | In the 1980s, the USA entered another period of economic boom, although the economic de-regulation that produced it also helped to create a rather aggressive breed of capitalism that contributed to the financial collapse of the current ‘credit crunch’ (Wall Street, Inside Job). In contrast, the USSR was in crisis: its political leadership was inept and its economy was stagnating. In East Germany, the people under communist rule were increasingly unhappy with the police state that they found themselves living under (The Lives of Others). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was the first step towards the complete collapse of the USSR itself, a dramatic period in the 1990s which was both disconcerting and exciting for the people who lived through it (as shown comically in Goodbye Lenin). |
| **2000s** | The final decade of the 20th Century saw another resurgence of Islamic extremism. The Al Q’aeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center led to President George “W” Bush declaring a ‘War on Terror’ that saw not only the USA, but Britain too, launch controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan satirised in the dark comedy of Four Lions and In the Loop. This inevitably heightened tensions once more between Arabs (broadly supported by Muslim nations) and the Israelis (broadly supported by the USA) (Lemon Tree, Death in Gaza). |

Comments? Suggestions? **Contact me** at [www.activehistory.co.uk](http://www.activehistory.co.uk)
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