

Youth Scholars Institute

2010 Program

TITLE: World War II in History, Film, & Fiction

INSTRUCTOR: Rebecca McCoy, PhD, Associate Professor of History

DESCRIPTION: This course is for any student who has ever wondered about the historical accuracy of films such as “Pearl Harbor” or “Schindler’s List”, loved historical novels, or thought about how historians reconstruct the past. The central question of the course is “How do we know about the past?” What kinds of sources do historians, journalists, and film makers use when they portray the past? How do these people put a “spin” on the past? To what extent do we use mythmaking about the past for political ends? How are historical writing, film making, and fiction different? What obligations do teachers, historians, writers, and film makers have to be honest and accurate? In short, we will explore the boundaries between history and fiction. To give the course a focus, we will explore selected aspects of World War II, including the nature of Nazi Germany, US involvement, and the Holocaust. World War II was a watershed in modern history, having a profound impact on the world we know today. The war inaugurated vast changes in the technology of war, the explicit adoption of racial political ideologies, and industrialized killing. In the aftermath of the war, the world launched into the Cold War and European power shrank as former colonies gained their independence. Finally, the experience of the war forced an unprecedented level of mythmaking as some countries tried to ignore or forget, and others emerged with a heroic version of their role. All of these themes raise important and timely questions about the nature of democracy and dictatorship, the way in which Americans and Germans have constructed our sense of national identity since 1945, and the issue of ethnic cleansing. During the class sessions, we will watch some documentaries and a popular film and discuss the ways that they represent historical events. We will discuss the use and interpretation of evidence, and examine some historical sources. We will also explore the ethical requirement to portray the past accurately. One of the highlights of the course will be a visit to the Lebanon County Historical Society in order to see the kinds of materials that professional historians actually use to construct the texts and books that we read, and to think about how museums present history to the public.