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Hitler and Hollywood:  
The Collaboration of American Movie Studios with Nazi Germany

By  
Benjamin Alexander Urwand

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
History  
in the  
Graduate Division  
of the  
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:  
Professor Leon Litwack, Chair  
Professor Martin Jay  
Greil Marcus  
Professor Carol Clover

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Abstract

Hitler and Hollywood:

The Collaboration of American Movie Studios with Nazi Germany

by

Benjamin Alexander Urwand

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Leon Litwack, Chair

From 1933 to 1940, the Hollywood studios came to an arrangement with the Nazis that both parties understood at the time as "collaboration [Zusammenarbeit]." The studios sold around 250 movies to Germany in this period, in return for which they had to agree not to attack the Nazis in any of their productions. When the United States entered the Second World War in 1941, the studios finally put out a barrage of anti-Nazi pictures, but refused to use the medium to bring the genocide of the Jews to the world's attention.

The collaboration of the American studios with Nazi Germany has never been addressed in any of the scholarly or popular literature on the Third Reich or in the history of film. This project draws on primary materials from dozens of archives and hundreds of movies to tell a story that is completely unknown.

in memory of  
Michael Rogin (1937-2001)

## Introduction

Eleven men were sitting in a screening room in Berlin. Only a few of them were Nazis. At the front of the room was Dr. Ernst Seeger, chief censor from long before Hitler came to power; he was assisted by two film men, an architect, and a pastor. There were several lawyers present, and two expert witnesses. The movie they were about to see came all the way from America, and it was called *King Kong*.

When the projector began to whirl, one of the men stood up. He read out a long script to emphasize the fictitious nature of the events on the screen. As he spoke, an enormously oversized gorilla fell in love with a beautiful woman and then fell off the Empire State Building. With the gorilla lying dead on the ground, one of the characters muttered something about “beauty and the beast,” and the movie came to an end.<sup>1</sup>

It was time to turn to the official proceedings. Dr. Seeger looked over at one of the expert witnesses, Professor Zeiss from the German Health Office. “In your expert opinion,” he asked, “could this picture be expected to damage the health of normal spectators?”<sup>2</sup>

Zeiss was in no mood to cooperate. “First,” he said, “I need to know whether the company trying to sell this film is German or American.”

“It’s a German distributor,” Seeger replied.

Zeiss erupted. “I am astounded and shocked,” he yelled, “that a *German* company would try to obtain permission for a film that can only be damaging to the health of its viewers. It is not merely incomprehensible but indeed an impertinence to show such a film, for this film is NOTHING LESS THAN AN ATTACK ON THE NERVES OF THE GERMAN PEOPLE!”<sup>3</sup>

Everyone was silent for a moment. Seeger then requested that the expert not judge the motives of the company but confine his statements to his own area of expertise.<sup>4</sup>

Zeiss returned to the original question. “It provokes our racial instincts,” he said, “to show a blonde woman of the German type in the hand of an ape. It harms the healthy racial feelings of the German people. The torture to which this woman is exposed, her mortal fear, and the other horrible things that one would only imagine in a drunken frenzy are harmful to German health.

“My judgment has nothing to do with the technical achievements of the film, which I recognize. Nor do I care what other countries think is good for *their* people. For the German people, this film is unbearable.”<sup>5</sup>

Zeiss had argued his case with all the zeal of a good National Socialist. No one could fault his motives. In response, Dr. Schulte, assistant practitioner at a mental hospital in Berlin, defended the film company’s position. He was as ice-cold as Zeiss was fiery, and he calmly denied all the professor’s charges.

“In every instance that the film potentially seems dangerous,” he said, “it is in fact merely ridiculous. The voice-over we have added only confirms this. We must not forget

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<sup>1</sup> *King Kong*, dir. Merian C. Cooper, RKO, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, September 15, 1933, 1, Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt. All translations in the dissertation are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 2-3. My emphasis.

that we are dealing with an *American* film produced for American spectators, and that the German public is considerably more critical. Even if it is admitted that the kidnapping of the blonde woman by a terrific beast is a delicate matter, it still does not go beyond the borders of the permissible.

“Psychopaths or women,” he added, “who could be thrown into a panic by the film, must not provide the criterion for this decision.”<sup>6</sup>

The committee members were at an impasse. Both sides had advanced tenable arguments; no one was willing to pass judgment just yet. A few months earlier, all cultural institutions in Germany had been put under the jurisdiction of the Propaganda Ministry, and ever since then no one really knew what was permissible and what was not. Certainly no one wanted to get on the bad side of the new Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels. Seeger therefore wrote to the Ministry about the case and he set up another hearing for the following week, by which time the committee would know for sure whether *King Kong* harmed German racial feelings.

There was just one more thing Seeger needed to do. He wrote to Zeiss and asked him to untangle his original statement. Was *King Kong* harmful to German health simply because it endangered the race instinct?

Four days later Seeger received a reply. “It is untrue,” Zeiss wrote, “that I said the film endangers the race instinct and is therefore dangerous to one’s health. Rather, my expert opinion is that the film is *in the first place* dangerous to one’s health, and that it additionally endangers the race instinct, which is another reason it endangers one’s health.”<sup>7</sup>

Zeiss’s letter may not have been entirely clear, but it certainly seemed as if he thought the film endangered one’s health. The committee now just needed to hear from the Propaganda Ministry. A full week passed and Seeger was forced to postpone the upcoming meeting. Another week passed and the Propaganda Ministry was still reviewing the film. Then a letter arrived. After all the fuss, the Propaganda Ministry announced that *King Kong* did *not* harm the race instinct. Seeger quickly reconvened the committee.

Fewer people attended this time. The specialists had already testified, and the screenwriter was no longer needed. The distribution company had abandoned the idea of a voice-over and had been working on a new film title to make the events seem fictitious instead. The company submitted the title – its seventh attempt – and then the meeting got underway.

Seeger began by summarizing the plot of the film. “On an undiscovered island in the South Sea, animals from prehistoric times are still able to exist: a fifteen-meter high gorilla, sea-snakes, dinosaurs of various kinds, a gigantic bird, and others. Outside this prehistoric empire, separated by a wall, live blacks who offer human sacrifices to the gorilla ‘King Kong.’ The blacks kidnap the blonde star of a film expedition and present her to King Kong instead of a woman of their own race. The ship’s crew invades the gorilla’s empire and has terrible battles with the prehistoric beasts in order to survive. They capture the gorilla by rendering him unconscious with a gas bomb, and they take him to New York. The gorilla breaks out during an exhibition, everyone flees in horror,

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<sup>6</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 3. My emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, October 5, 1933, 1-2. My emphasis.

and an elevated commuter train is derailed. The gorilla then climbs up a skyscraper with his girl-doll in his hand, and airplanes bring about his downfall.”<sup>8</sup>

Upon completing the reading, Seeger announced the big news. “Since the specialist from the Propaganda Ministry stated that the film does not harm German racial feelings, the only thing left to determine is whether the film endangers the people’s health.”<sup>9</sup>

No one questioned this line of reasoning. Seeger had just said that the blacks in the film presented a white woman to King Kong “instead of a woman of their own race.” He was invoking Thomas Jefferson’s claim from 150 years earlier that black men preferred white women “as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Seeger was bringing up an obvious racial problem with the film. This image did not offend the Propaganda Ministry, however. In the Third Reich it was perfectly acceptable to show an “oranootan’s” desire for “a blonde woman of the German type.”

It was acceptable even though this was also one of the images that the allies had used in the previous World War. In a massive propaganda campaign, the British and Americans had portrayed the Germans as savage gorillas who threatened the purity of innocent white women.<sup>11</sup> The campaign incensed many young Germans who went on to become Nazis, but it did not seem to be on anyone’s mind any more.

The committee therefore returned to the original question of whether *King Kong* could be expected to damage the health of normal spectators. Zeiss had said that the film was “an attack on the nerves of the German people,” and he had referred to particular images that he thought had a damaging effect. He had failed, however, to provide any justification for his view. The committee was unable to accept his testimony, and felt instead that “the overall effect of this typical American adventure film on the German spectator is merely to provide kitschy entertainment, so that no incurable or lasting effect on the health of the normal spectator can be expected.” The film was simply too “unreal” and “fairy-tale like” to be believable. Seeger approved it for release under its new title, *The Fable of King Kong, an American Trick-and-Sensation Film*.<sup>12</sup>

Still, he was not entirely comfortable showing the film in its current form. He cut the close-ups of King Kong holding the screaming woman in his hand, for according to Zeiss they were particularly damaging to German health. He also cut the derailling of the commuter train, claiming that the scene “shakes the people’s confidence in this important means of public transportation.”<sup>13</sup>

On December 1, 1933, *King Kong* opened simultaneously in thirty first-class theaters throughout Berlin.<sup>14</sup> The film received mixed reviews in the press. The main Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, admired the technical achievement but criticized the cheapness of the plot. “It is unknown whether it was the Americans or the Germans

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<sup>8</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Penguin, New York, 1999 [1785], 145.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Julian Saltman for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, 5.

<sup>14</sup> G.R. Canty, “Economic and Trade Note,” 158, January 25, 1934, Commerce Department, Record Group 151, National Archives, College Park; *King Kong* advertisements, *Der Angriff*, November 30 and December 1, 1933.



who felt a need to call this a trick-and-sensation film,” the paper reported. “It is also unknown whether this was meant to be an excuse or a justification. All we know is that when we Germans hear the beautiful word ‘fabel,’ we imagine something very different from this picture.”<sup>15</sup>

Goebbels’ personal newspaper *Der Angriff* began its review by posing the question of why *King Kong* enjoyed such incredible success in the United States. “We venture to say that it had little to do with technology and everything to do with the plot. This picture shows the terrific struggle of almighty nature – represented by King Kong and gigantic dinosaurs – against the civilized power of the highly developed white race ... Does civilization triumph in the end? Hardly! In truth King Kong is the tragic hero of this film.”<sup>16</sup>

The fascination with *King Kong* went all the way up to the highest echelons of the Third Reich. As the Foreign Press Chief noted, “it had Hitler absolutely spellbound. He talked about it for days.”<sup>17</sup>

Hollywood movies were a major part of everyday life in Nazi Germany before the outbreak of World War II. Around 250 new American features were screened in Germany in this period – or between 30 and 50 per year – and they infused every aspect of German culture. A casual observer walking the streets of Berlin would have seen the evidence everywhere. There were lines of people outside the theaters, photographs of Hollywood stars on the covers of magazines, and glowing reviews of the latest movies in the newspapers. But for all the success and for all the hype, the American studios were forced to pay a terrible price.

The story of Hollywood’s dealings with Nazi Germany has been virtually untold up to now.<sup>18</sup> What we have instead is a staggering number of books on Hollywood in the War years: *Hollywood at War*, *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II*, *Visions of War*, *Hollywood Goes to War* (three books with this title), *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, *Celluloid Soldiers*, *The Star-Spangled Screen*, *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945* – to name just a few.<sup>19</sup> The consequence of

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<sup>15</sup> “Filmtechnik besigt die Urwelt: ‘Die Fabel von King-Kong,’” *Völkischer Beobachter*, December 3/4, 1933.

<sup>16</sup> “Die Fabel von King Kong,” *Der Angriff*, December 2, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Ernst Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness*, J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1957, 233.

<sup>18</sup> The one book on the subject, Markus Spieker’s *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz. Der Amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich*, while brilliantly researched on the German side, lacks any overarching argument.

<sup>19</sup> Ken D. Jones and Arthur F. McClure, *Hollywood at War: The American Motion Picture and World War II*, A.S. Barnes, New York, 1973; Robert Fyne, *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, 1994; Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1982; Colin Schindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939-1952*, Routledge, Boston, 1979; Edward F. Dolan Jr., *Hollywood Goes to War*, Hamlyn, Twickenham, 1985; Clayton R. Koppes, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987; Allen L. Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War*, Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1983; Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism*, New York University Press, New York, 1999; Bernard F. Dick, *The Star-Spangled Film: The American World War II Film*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1985; Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt, *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*, McFarland, Jefferson, 1987.

the disproportionate attention given to the war years is that Hollywood has long been celebrated as a bastion of anti-fascism.

The complex web of interactions between Hollywood and the German government in the decade before the War reveals quite a different story – one not of anti-fascism but of “collaboration” [“Zusammenarbeit”]. The studios agreed not to attack the Nazis in any of their productions, and in return American movies were permitted in Germany, even potentially threatening ones like *King Kong*. At the same time – and this was a result less of the direct arrangement between the two groups than of a much deeper shared understanding – the American studios eliminated Jewish characters from the screen entirely. For seven years, the studios put out movies that were unobjectionable and sometimes even beneficial from the Nazi standpoint, and as a result they were able to continue doing business with Germany.

At the center of the collaboration was Hitler himself. Hitler took movies extremely seriously, and in December 1930, two years before becoming dictator of Germany, he organized riots against Universal Pictures’ *All Quiet on the Western Front* in Berlin. His actions sparked the first instances of collaboration with the American studios. For the remainder of the decade he personally supervised an arrangement that was never discussed outside a few offices in Berlin, New York, and Los Angeles.

It is time to remove the layers that have hidden the collaboration for so long and to reveal the historical connection between the most important individual of the twentieth century and the movie capital of the world.

## Acknowledgements

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Hitler's Film Theory

All of Hitler's greatest biographers have in some way picked up on Hitler's obsession with movies. Alan Bullock ended the first major biography *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*, with a tribute to Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*.<sup>1</sup> Joachim Fest, the first serious German biographer, wrote a chapter on Hitler's lack of a personality in which he cited Hitler's preference for escapist movies.<sup>2</sup> Ian Kershaw's recent two-volume work contains some more reliable anecdotes about Hitler's movie watching.<sup>3</sup>

None of Hitler's biographers, however, have noticed how central the movies were to his worldview. This is inexcusable for two reasons. First, Hitler discussed the significance of film himself in a key chapter of *Mein Kampf*. Second, the Bundesarchiv in Berlin holds copious records on Hitler's opinions of movies as well as his own handwritten corrections to the texts of German newsreels. All these files are explicitly referenced in the index to NS 10, *Persönliche Adjutantur des Führers und Reichskanzlers* (widely available at libraries worldwide).<sup>4</sup>

This chapter draws on those files for the first time to work out the implications of Hitler's pronouncements on film in *Mein Kampf*. It is, after all, hardly surprising that Hitler's whole worldview should have been entangled with the world of the movies, since he emerged at precisely the same moment as they did.

Every night before going to bed Adolf Hitler watched a movie. He first ate dinner with his invited guests, and when the plates had all been cleared from the table, the group proceeded to his personal cinema to watch whatever pictures his adjutants had been able to procure.<sup>5</sup> It was a relatively pleasant experience for everyone involved, for it was one of the few times when Hitler was not talking. During dinner or at official meetings he frightened or bored his guests with his rantings, and at other points he dictated endlessly to his secretaries, but for this one moment, which began somewhere between eight and nine p.m. and ran late into the night, he was absolutely captivated by the images on the screen. Afterwards he retired to bed and he rarely woke up before noon the next day.<sup>6</sup>

Hitler did not speak much during the movies, but he made his opinions of them absolutely clear, and his adjutants faithfully noted them down. For the most part they fit into one of the following categories: "good" [*gut*], "bad" [*schlecht*], or "switched off"

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bullock, *Hitler, A Study in Tyranny*, Harper, New York, 1962, 805.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, Penguin, New York, 2002 [1973], 511-538.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, Penguin, London, 1998; Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, Penguin, London, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich P. Kahlenberg, Bestand NS 10: *Persönliche Adjutantur des Führers und Reichskanzlers*, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Fritz Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr werden wollte*, Velbert/Kettwig, S. Kappe VG, Velbert, 1964, 68-78; Nicolaus von Below, *Als Hitlers Adjutant 1937-45*, von Hase & Koehler, Mainz, 1980, 33, 152, 282-3.

<sup>6</sup> For Hitler's outbursts of rage, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, Penguin, London, 1998, 48, 58, 162. For Hitler's dull monologues, see Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, Penguin, London, 2000, 500. For Hitler's constant dictation to his secretaries and his tendency to oversleep, see Hitler's daily agendas, *Adjutantur des Führers*, NS 10, Bundesarchiv Berlin.

[*abgebrochen*]. Occasionally his judgments were a bit more complicated, such as when he watched an actress he admired in a Spanish production: “Imperio Argentina: very good; direction: bad.”<sup>7</sup> Other times he shifted the wording slightly, describing a film as “excellent” or “mediocre” or “the most potent shit” [*Mist in höchster Potenz*].<sup>8</sup> But the final category never changed. Whenever a film prevented Hitler from speaking his mind, he switched it off, for at that moment he had something more important to say – or perhaps something more important to do...

As the years passed, there was only one obvious change in Hitler’s movie routine. His adjutants complained that there were 365 days in a year, and even with access to the Propaganda Ministry’s entire holdings there were not enough good German films to satisfy him. They therefore asked the chief censor to start sending more pictures from the United States. Hitler was pleased at the opportunity to learn about American culture by watching Hollywood movies, and as usual his opinions were noted down.<sup>9</sup> Here is a list of what he watched mostly in June 1938:

*Way Out West* (Laurel & Hardy): good!

*Swiss Miss* (Laurel & Hardy): the Führer applauded the film

*Tarzan*: bad

*The King of Arizona*: switched off after the first 100 meters

*Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* (starring Gary Cooper, Claudette Colbert, directed by Ernst Lubitsch): switched off

*Shanghai* (starring Charles Boyer): switched off

*Tip-off Girls*: switched off<sup>10</sup>

It was a typical Hitler list. He saw so many films, but his opinions of them always fit into the same categories. His adjutants had even started guessing what he would think of films before he had seen them. They knew, for example, that anything starring Greta Garbo would receive the highest praise. That was especially the case since Hitler’s memorable reaction to *Camille*, a melodrama in which Garbo pretended not to love a member of the upper class (played by Robert Taylor). Hitler found it overwhelming to watch his favorite actress sacrifice her happiness in this way, and he broke down during the final scene in which she died in her lover’s arms.<sup>11</sup> As Goebbels’ wrote, “Everything sinks in the presence of the great, isolated art of the godly woman. We are dazed and overcome in the deepest way. We don’t wipe away our tears. Taylor is Garbo’s ideal

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<sup>7</sup> Daily agenda, June 22, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>8</sup> Daily agenda, June 19, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>9</sup> Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr werden wollte*, 78. One of Hitler’s most brilliant biographers, Joachim Fest, claims that the Führer was an “unperson,” and cites his obsession with escapist films as evidence that he had no inner life. The opposite was almost certainly the case. Hitler’s opinions of movies probably provide the best glimpse available of his private mind. Since most of his recorded opinions were of German films, they fall outside the scope of this study. A full analysis of Hitler’s opinions, based on the records of his adjutants in NS 10 at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin could provide new insight into his personality. Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, Penguin, 1982 [1973], 511-538.

<sup>10</sup> Daily agenda, June 23, 1938; Daily agenda, June 21, 1938; Bahls to Propaganda Ministry, April 24, 1939; Bahls to Propaganda Ministry, June 23, 1938; Daily agenda, June 30, 1938; Daily agenda, July 4, 1938; Daily agenda, June 19, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Camille*, dir. George Cukor, MGM, 1936.

partner. The Führer is glowing. He thinks that bad casting of the male lead can often destroy the achievement of women. But in this film everything fits together perfectly.”<sup>12</sup>

Not everyone was as aware of Hitler’s movie preferences, of course, and this could occasionally lead to awkward formulations. After Hitler watched a Laurel & Hardy slapstick comedy called *Block-Heads*, he said that the film was good because it contained “a lot of very nice ideas and clever jokes.”<sup>13</sup> The reviewer in *Der Angriff*, the second biggest Nazi newspaper, had a different impression: “The film sets up the simplest situations in the most primitive and overenthusiastic manner, so you can predict just what will happen every time ... You can easily imagine the Americans throwing their arms up in the air with joy as the film unfolds. A nation that likes such a film must be deeply uncomplicated.”<sup>14</sup> If the reviewer was describing Hitler’s exact reaction he obviously did not know it. Nor was he the only party member to find fault with the picture. When MGM presented *Block-Heads* to the German censorship board, it was turned down because of the way it joked about the World War. The censors objected to the idea that Stan Laurel could have been guarding a trench from 1918 to 1938, unaware that the War had been over for twenty years, and they disliked the thick-accented German aviator who told him he could go home now.<sup>15</sup> Hitler reacted differently to the scene: in his view it was just funny.

But these were minor disagreements in the scheme of things. Every now and then Hitler reacted to a movie in a way that no one could have predicted. He was particularly keen to watch Paramount’s film *Tip-off Girls* because it dealt with a subject that was receiving a lot of press in Germany. Some men had recently been found guilty of highway robbery in a Berlin court, and Hitler wanted to see images of the crime, so he requested a copy of the film along with a written translation of the dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

He was following very closely as he watched the opening scene: two men were driving a truck down a highway, and they came to a sudden stop when they saw a woman lying in the middle of the road.

“Are you hurt,” one man asked.

“Yeah, what’s the matter babe,” said the other.

“Oh, they threw me out of the car,” she managed to reply.

Then from behind the bushes a gangster pointed a gun at the two men. “Alright you guys, this is a stickup,” he said. “I want your truck and everything in it. Come on, get moving.”

As his men took over the truck, the gangster pulled the woman aside. “Nice work Reena,” he said. “Deegan will be pleased.”

“That’s my job, Marty – pleasing Deegan.”

It did not take long for Hitler to switch off the film.<sup>17</sup> *Tip-off Girls* was definitely bad, but that was not the point in this case; he switched it off because he suddenly knew he had something more important to do. Three days later, a law appeared which he had

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed., Elke Fröhlich, K.G. Saur, Munich, 2001, January 25, 1937, 3/II, 344.

<sup>13</sup> Wünsche to Propaganda Ministry, November 21, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>14</sup> “Amerikanischer und deutscher Humor,” *Der Angriff*, October 23, 1937.

<sup>15</sup> Censorship lists, Deutsches Filminstitut, Frankfurt; *Block-Heads*, dir. John G. Blystone, MGM, 1938.

<sup>16</sup> *Tip-Off Girls*, dir. Louis King, Paramount, 1938; Daily agenda, June 19, 1938; Bahls to Propaganda Ministry, July 4, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>17</sup> Daily agenda, June 22, 1938, NS 10.

personally written. It was a most peculiar law because it consisted of only one sentence: “Whoever sets up a road block with intent to commit a crime will be punished by death.”<sup>18</sup>

While Hitler undoubtedly derived a lot of pleasure from his movies, that was not why he sat up night after night watching them. Late in life he may have convinced himself that he was merely trying to avoid thinking about a harsh reality, but deep down he knew as well as anybody that the medium contained a mysterious, almost magical power, the likes of which he had only experienced in a big auditorium in front of an audience. There was a reason why his screenings were the one thing that could keep him quiet: it was because he saw in them a possibility second only to his own oratorical abilities. For this one moment of the day he allowed himself to take on the role of the spectator, but far from providing an escape from his everyday life, the movies fueled his usual obsessions. He watched on the screen something similar to what he knew he was capable of, and he tried to imagine new ways of harnessing its power. As Chancellor of Germany, Hitler would capitalize on what he had learned from the movies. But he had been thinking about them a lot longer than that.

It started – or it may have started – around twenty-five years earlier, back in 1909. With no money to his name, Hitler was spending his days wandering the streets of Vienna, and his nights sleeping out in the open air – or, when the weather was bad, at a shelter for the homeless. One day he made friends with a man named Reinhold Hanisch, who persuaded him to write home for money so he could move into a men’s lodging home instead. At the new residence, the two men came up with a promising business strategy: Hitler would paint postcards of Vienna, which Hanisch would then sell at various pubs throughout the city, and they would split the profits between them.<sup>19</sup>

Hanisch continued: “At Easter we did well and had a little more money to spend, so Hitler went to the movies. I preferred to drink some wine, which Hitler despised. The next day I knew at once that he was planning a new project. He had seen *The Tunnel*, a picture made from a novel by Bernhard Kellermann, and he told me the story. An orator makes a speech in a tunnel and becomes a great popular tribune. Hitler was aflame with the idea that this was the way to found a new party. I laughed at him and didn’t take him seriously ... He had more success with other people, however, for they were always ready for fun, and Hitler was a sort of amusement for them. Henceforth there were eloquent speeches in the Home for Men.”<sup>20</sup>

Hanisch’s story needs to be treated with caution. For a start, it is highly unlikely that Hitler intended to found a political party this early in his life. Second, although *The Tunnel* did contain a scene in which the hero gave a magnificent speech, the picture was made not in 1909 but in 1915.<sup>21</sup> By then Hitler had already left the Home for Men and was serving in the German army. Finally, Hitler gave his first successful speeches at the end of the World War, not before it began. Still it would be a mistake to discount Hanisch’s story entirely. There were several popular movies about orators in 1909, and it

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State*, Longman, Essex, 1981 [1969], 339.

<sup>19</sup> Reinhold Hanisch, “I Was Hitler’s Buddy,” *New Republic*, April 5, 1939, 239-241.

<sup>20</sup> Hanisch, “I Was Hitler’s Buddy,” 242. The translation of the final sentence of this quote is not the one that appears in *The New Republic* but in Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, Penguin, 1974 [1973], 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Der Tunnel*, dir. William Wauer, Imperator-Film GmbH, 1915. There is a copy of this film at the Munich Filmmuseum.



is possible that Hitler saw one that convinced him of his true calling long before he officially discovered his talent.<sup>22</sup> Yet whether or not Hanisch was making it all up, something about his anecdote rings true on an even deeper level, for while dictating the words of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler made the same connection himself.

He started with a simple claim: books, he said, were absolutely worthless. No one ever brought about any great, earth-shattering event by writing a book. There was only one way to inspire change, and that was through the spoken word. Hitler made fun of the members of the bourgeoisie who turned their noses at the public speaker and valued the sophistication of the writer instead. “Oh yes, they are very, very clever,” he said, “they know everything, understand everything” – but what they did not understand was that no matter how “cultivated” or “brilliant” a writer was, he could never change the views of the ordinary man on the street. A great orator, if he were truly adept at his craft, could face a crowd holding the exact opposite position to his own, and eventually bring them round to his side. But a writer could never hope to convince even a single member of the crowd of anything.<sup>23</sup>

Hitler explained why this was the case. The first reason, he said, was that the vast majority of people were inherently lazy and unlikely to pick up a book if it went against what they believed to be true. There was a chance that they might glance at a leaflet or a poster advertising a contrary position, but they would never give it sufficient attention to change their own views. Just as Hitler was dismissing the written word completely, however, he thought of a single technological development that might just become the equal of oratory some day:

The picture in all its forms up to the film has greater possibilities. Here a man needs to use his brains even less; it suffices to look, or at most to read, extremely brief texts; and thus most will more readily accept a *pictorial representation* than *read an article* of any *length*. The picture brings them in a much briefer time, I might almost say at one stroke, the enlightenment which they obtain from written matter only after arduous reading.<sup>24</sup>

It was an unusual moment of *Mein Kampf*. Hitler was of course aware of the power of drawings and diagrams, since he had just designed the striking new party flag (the swastika in a white circle on a red background).<sup>25</sup> In extending his argument to film, though, he was daring to imagine something that might rival his own powers – something that might be capable of transforming the opinions of a large group of people quickly and without fuss. Yet almost as soon as he had mentioned this possibility, he seemed to retreat from it, for he quickly reminded himself of the second great advantage of the spoken word. Just as an orator was accessible to ordinary people, Hitler said, they were accessible to him. He stood directly in front of them, and if he were talented he would pick up on their reactions in such a way that they would affect his performance. If his audience did not understand him, he would make his explanations simpler; if they did not

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<sup>22</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 109-128.

<sup>23</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1943 [1925 and 1927], 106-7, 469, 479, 471.

<sup>24</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 470.

<sup>25</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 147.

follow him, he would lay out his ideas more slowly and carefully; and if they were not convinced by him, he would give further examples. Above all, he would sense the unspoken doubts of his listeners and then dramatize the process by which they could overcome them.<sup>26</sup>

But suddenly Hitler remembered something else. Whereas people encountered books and pamphlets in isolation, they watched theater and film in communal settings. And when they witnessed an event with many others around them, they frequently experienced an intoxicating effect that could stir the power of their convictions. This was especially the case at night. From years of giving speeches, Hitler had noticed that spectators were more likely to surrender to the “domineering force of a stronger will” after the sun had gone down. Similarly, he said, a play always exerted a much greater effect at night than in the afternoon. Then he turned to a different example. “The same applies even to a movie,” he said. “But a film is no different in the afternoon than at nine in the evening.”<sup>27</sup> So even though films were shot in advance, even though their actors had absolutely no ability to pick up on the mood of an audience and vary their performances accordingly, if they were screened at around nine p.m. – just when Hitler watched them – they could take on a power akin to oratory.

These were just a few scattered remarks, of course. They were not meant to be interpreted as a coherent theory of film. Nevertheless, they were the first indication of an obsession that would remain with Hitler until his final days.

There is an interesting legend behind the genesis of *Mein Kampf*. Apparently while serving his sentence for the failed putsch attempt of 1923, Hitler was disturbing the other inmates of Landsberg Prison with his endless monologues, so someone suggested that he write his memoirs instead. He was much taken with the idea and started dictating immediately to his chauffeur Emil Maurice and later to Rudolf Hess. The prisoners were happy to get back to their usual activities, but soon the old reality set in, for every evening Hitler insisted on reading his compositions to his literally captive audience.<sup>28</sup>

The pages Hitler dictated in those days have been branded dull, rambling, and badly written, and for the most part the accusations are true. Hitler was recycling arguments from speeches he had given countless times before, and retelling his own experiences in a romantic manner that bore little relation to reality. Yet to focus on such accusations is to miss the point. Hitler’s lies and distortions may not have been well received by the other prisoners, but they resonated with an entire generation of Germans. It is therefore worth examining them not so much for their veracity as for their popular appeal. And here we may be getting closer to the reason behind Hitler’s fascination with film. He thought deeply about the new medium not just because it contained the same possibilities as oratory but because it had actually influenced his own oratorical style. This was particularly apparent in the way he recounted the single most important experience of his life – an episode that would occupy every one of his major speeches.

When he was young, Hitler said, he did not amount to much. He wished he had been born a hundred years earlier. He sat in a small room in Munich and read.<sup>29</sup> Yet, he

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<sup>26</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 470-471.

<sup>27</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 473-475.

<sup>28</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 83.

added, “from the first hour I was convinced that in case of a war ... I would at once leave my books.”<sup>30</sup> With the outbreak of hostilities on August 2, 1914, that was precisely what he did. He left his books and – as he described it – the film began.

As though it were yesterday, image after image passes before my eyes. I see myself donning the uniform in the circle of my dear comrades, turning out for the first time, drilling, etc., until the day came for us to march off.<sup>31</sup>

Then came sweeping long shots of the landscape as Hitler’s regiment marched westward along the Rhine. The men were plagued by a single thought in those days: what if they reached the front too late? But they need not have worried. One damp, cold morning as they marched through Flanders in silence, they were attacked for the first time. The silence turned to a cracking and a roaring, and then to something else entirely:

From the distance the strains of a song reached our ears, coming closer and closer, leaping from company to company, and just as Death plunged a busy hand into our ranks, the song reached us too and we passed it along: *‘Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt!’*<sup>32</sup>

But the song did not last forever. As the days passed, the men in Hitler’s regiment came to know mortal fear. Their laughter and rejoicing disappeared, and they started to question whether they should sacrifice their lives for the fatherland. It was a test that they all had to undergo. Each man heard a voice in his head telling him to abandon the struggle, and after many months each man overcame that voice. Eventually the young volunteers had become calm and determined old soldiers.<sup>33</sup>

The real menace, when it arrived, came in quite a different form. The enemy dropped leaflets from planes in the sky, and the troops read their messages, which were always the same: the German people were yearning for peace, but the Kaiser would not allow it. If the Bavarians stopped fighting on the side of the Kaiser and “Prussian militarism,” then peace would be restored. Hitler admitted that he did not recognize the danger of these leaflets at the time. He and his comrades simply laughed at them, passed them on to their superiors, and went on fighting with the same courage as before.<sup>34</sup>

It was only when Hitler returned home for the first time that he witnessed the effects of this enemy propaganda. In Berlin, soldiers were bragging about their own cowardice, and Munich was even worse: “Anger, discontent, cursing, wherever you went!”<sup>35</sup> At the center of it all were the Jews. They occupied the main positions of authority in Germany, since the bravest men were off fighting at the front, and – taking their cues from the enemy leaflets – they were creating division between the Bavarians and Prussians, and sowing the seeds for a revolution. Hitler was disgusted by this state of affairs, so he returned to the battlefield where he felt more comfortable.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 163.

<sup>31</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 164-165.

<sup>33</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 165.

<sup>34</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 188-190.

<sup>35</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 193.

<sup>36</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 191-194.

Of course, this account of the War was full of inaccuracies. For a start, Hitler failed to mention that he was merely a dispatch runner in the army – a dangerous job, to be sure, but one incomparable to that of a regular soldier. By contrast, German Jews served in the army in equal proportion to the rest of the population, and frequently with great distinction.<sup>37</sup> But these details were beside the point. Hitler was building his picture to a dramatic climax in order to lend credence to the most enduring lie of all.

Upon returning to the front, Hitler said, he found conditions a lot worse than before. The young replacements were worthless compared to the first volunteers, and the men found themselves defending the same territory they had won years earlier in the original battle sequence. Yet despite these setbacks, Hitler's regiment held firm. It was still the same great "army of heroes." Then, on the night of October 13, 1917, the English army used a new kind of gas whose effects were mostly unknown to the Germans, and Hitler was caught in the middle of the attack. "A few hours later, my eyes had turned into glowing coals," he said. "It had grown dark around me."<sup>38</sup> Fade out.

Hitler awoke with immense pain in his eye sockets. He was unable to read the papers. His vision was coming back only gradually. And just when his eyesight was returning to normal, a local pastor visited the hospital and gave a short speech to the soldiers. The old man was shaking as he said that the War was over, and that Germany was now a republic. He praised the boys for serving the fatherland courageously, but it was time to put their faith in the victors. Hitler was distraught. After all the army's struggles, to be betrayed by a few cowards back home! This was the "stab-in-the-back" legend that he would defend so vigorously, and as it sunk into his consciousness, the effect was overwhelming. "Again everything went black before my eyes," he said.<sup>39</sup> He quickly drew a moral from his experience: "There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard either-or."<sup>40</sup> Then everything faded out completely.

It was the end of Hitler's film – but it was not the end of his theory. He had a very important analysis to make of the events he had just described. In a brief chapter entitled "War Propaganda," he outlined a whole world view that would explain many of his later actions.

In Hitler's opinion, any struggle against an enemy had to be waged on two fronts. The first was sheer physical strength and courage, which the German army had demonstrated heroically on the battlefield. The second, however, was propaganda – and on this front the German authorities had failed miserably. For four-and-a-half years they produced materials that were completely useless in the struggle against the allied forces. They suffered under the delusion that propaganda should be clever and entertaining on the one hand, and objective on the other. As a result they worked hard to make the enemy look ridiculous, when they should have made him look dangerous. Then, when the question of war guilt was on the table, they accepted partial responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities. "It would have been correct," Hitler pointed out, "to load every bit of blame on the shoulders of the enemy, even if this had not corresponded to the true facts, as it actually did."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 91, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 190, 199-202.

<sup>39</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 202-204.

<sup>40</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 206.

<sup>41</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 177-179, 181, 182.

The problem, Hitler said, was that the producers of this propaganda were fashioning their pamphlets, posters, and cartoons to the tastes of the bourgeoisie. In times of peace, that would not have been a major problem. But in wartime, nothing could have been more misguided, for the nation's whole existence was at stake. Instead of thinking about the aesthetic preferences of a small minority, the authorities should have targeted their output at the masses. And Hitler knew this group's psychology all too well. "The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous," he said.<sup>42</sup> Given these attributes, a successful piece of propaganda should limit itself to a few clear points and harp on about them over and over, until every last person was outraged. If propaganda were harnessed in this way, Hitler said, it could function as a weapon no less powerful than the one that soldiers employed on a battlefield.<sup>43</sup>

In fact it could be more powerful. For if Hitler had learned anything from the World War, it was that a successful propaganda campaign could trump the courage and heroism of an entire army. He had kept a keen eye on both sides' output from the very beginning, and he noticed that what the Germans failed to do, the British and Americans did with utter ruthlessness and brilliant calculation. At the same time as they were losing actual battles, they depicted the Germans as barbarians and Huns who were completely guilty for the outbreak of war. This propaganda spurred on their own soldiers, but it also did something else: after four years of hostilities, it actually managed to convince the German people themselves. And just when the great German army was about to prove victorious on the battlefield, a few villains back home were able to take advantage of this situation to stab the army in the back.<sup>44</sup>

Hitler could barely restrain his admiration for the propaganda campaign of the British and the Americans during the War. If he had been in charge of propaganda, he said, he would have matched their efforts, and the outcome of the War would have been quite different.<sup>45</sup> And yet in his account of the brilliance of the enemy's output, one detail was curiously absent. The anti-German propaganda that he was describing did not solely take the form of leaflets falling from the sky. Some of the most potent images came from Hollywood films. The Americans used the new medium to produce even more appealing versions of the one-sided propaganda that in Hitler's opinion helped bring about the German defeat. In *To Hell with the Kaiser!* the evil German leader carved up the world and gave America to his son; in *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* he committed all sorts of sexual atrocities; and in *The Great Victory* he ordered all widows and unmarried women to submit to his soldiers so that he could repopulate the Reich. In picture after picture, Germans were cast as murderers, plunderers, and rapists. One particularly nasty example, *Escaping the Hun*, even contained an "optional" scene in which German soldiers impaled a baby on their bayonets.<sup>46</sup>

Hitler did not mention any of these movies in *Mein Kampf* – nor did he say anything about the "hate films" that the Americans continued to release after the

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<sup>42</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 180-181, 179.

<sup>44</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 181-186.

<sup>45</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 188.

<sup>46</sup> Michael T. Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I, 1914-1941*, Associated University Press, East Brunswick, 1981, 147-151; Larry Wayne Ward, *The Motion Picture Goes to War: The U.S. Government Film Effort during World War I*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1981, 56.

hostilities ended. Even though there was no longer any official need for propaganda, the Hollywood studios insisted on producing a whole range of pictures about the War. For the most part these were not as extreme as the earlier efforts, but what they lacked in brutality they made up for in popularity. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), starring Rudolph Valentino, was a box-office sensation containing numerous images of German aggression. And Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (made in 1918 but rereleased in 1927) showed Chaplin break into German territory, kidnap the Kaiser, and bring an end to the War.<sup>47</sup>

Many people in Germany were not so happy that Hollywood was still releasing these kinds of pictures. For a start, anyone who shared Hitler's views about the reasons behind the German defeat believed that a continuing struggle was going on in the field of propaganda. Alfred Hugenberg, a right-wing nationalist who was head of UFA, the biggest German studio, took offense at virtually any Hollywood movie that mentioned the War. He had built up a media empire that included not just UFA but many newspapers as well, and whenever a "hate film" was released in Germany, he mobilized all his influence to attack it. He even organized a campaign against MGM's hit picture *The Big Parade* (1925), an entertaining war drama that contained no offensive portrayals of Germans whatsoever.<sup>48</sup>

Right-wing radicals were not the only group capable of taking offense at Hollywood's war movies, however. Ordinary Germans could also express shock and dismay at some of the more extreme images. One German citizen had a particularly telling reaction when he saw MGM's *Mare Nostrum* (1926) at a theater in the United States. He had loved *The Big Parade*, which he described as a patriotic American movie that bore no malice towards Germany at all. But *Mare Nostrum* was different. It told the story of an attractive German spy who unwittingly contributed to the sinking of an innocent passenger ship. Upon regretting her actions, she announced her resignation to the German authorities, but they were merciless and handed her over to the enemy. As hundreds of French soldiers lined up to shoot her, this spectator could hardly believe what he was seeing. "It is a repulsive, mean thing that this American film company has done, showing such things to the public eight years after the war ended," he said. "The German characters are so exaggerated and evil that you feel yourself starting to choke in disgust ... and you know that the rest of the world will start to dislike anything German as a result. America is always throwing around words like peace and reconciliation, but this film is a disgrace to the entire American film industry."<sup>49</sup>

*Mare Nostrum* was just one of a whole series of "German spy" movies that emerged in the 1920s. Popular opinion in Germany was mounting against them. Yet still Hitler did not speak out. He was waiting for a different kind of development. In November 1930, the German censorship board approved a new war movie that promised to be more successful than any other to date. It was Universal Pictures' *All Quiet on the Western Front*, based on Erich Maria Remarque's bestselling novel of the same title.

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<sup>47</sup> *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, dir. Rex Ingram, Metro Pictures Corporation, 1921; *Shoulder Arms*, dir. Charles Chaplin, Charles Chaplin Productions, 1918.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Saunders, "Rettung in den Verlust: Die Paramount Verträge," in Hans-Michael Bock/Michael Töteberg, eds, *Das UFA-Buch, Zweitausendeins*, Frankfurt, 1992, 174-9; *The Big Parade*, dir. King Vidor, MGM, 1925.

<sup>49</sup> "Metro-Goldwyn-Film 'Mare Nostrum,'" *Lichtbild-Bühne*, March 6, 1926; *Mare Nostrum*, dir. Rex Ingram, MGM, 1926.

Although Hitler did not take any action against the book, something about the film made it more dangerous and twisted, yet even more brilliant, than anything he had ever seen before.

It had to do with a development in film history that coincided with his own rise. Since around 1927, Hollywood had been putting out pictures that made use of the new invention of sound recording. The first couple of years had produced mixed results, but soon Hitler and Goebbels were starting to take more serious notice. In 1929 they watched *The Singing Fool*, Al Jolson's second major talkie after *The Jazz Singer*, and Goebbels noted his reaction in his diary. "I was surprised at the already far advanced technology of the sound film. Here is the future, and we are wrong to reject this as American bunk ... The content was dreadful, New-York style sentimental kitsch. But nevertheless: what we have to recognize here is the future and coming *opportunities*."<sup>50</sup>

Goebbels was right. *The Singing Fool* was harmless in itself, but in coupling sound with the moving image in a convincing way, it demonstrated the new power of the medium. Hitler and Goebbels were only beginning to imagine the possibilities when Universal Pictures put out *All Quiet on the Western Front*. From the opening sequence of this film, sound was being used in a very different way from before.

It was the beginning of the war in Germany, and a high school teacher was giving a speech to his students. He was staring at them intensely, waving his hands about in a theatrical manner, saying something about "honor" and "duty," but no one could hear him – a parade for the soldiers was taking place outside, and the music was drowning him out. Suddenly the band died down and his words were absolutely clear. "My beloved gents," he was saying, "This is what we must do. Strike with all our power. Give every ounce of strength to win victory before the end of the year." He clasped his hands together, apologized for what he was about to say, and then started to roar: "You are the life of the fatherland, you boys! You are the iron men of Germany! You are the gay heroes who will repulse the enemy when you are called upon to do so!" Of course – his voice was returning to normal now – it was not for him to suggest that they should stand up and defend their country. He was simply wondering whether the thought had yet crossed their minds.<sup>51</sup>

He was a good speaker, anyone could see that. But as the scene continued, it became clear that something more was going on. This was not just an orator making a speech; it was a film using its own devices to show the power of oratory. And now it used one of those devices: it cut to a shot of one of the boys watching the teacher with uncertainty. The teacher's voice was a bit more distant since he was no longer on the screen, but his words were still audible. "Perhaps," he suggested, "some will say that you should not be allowed to go yet; that you are too young; that you have homes, mothers, fathers; that you should not be torn away." As he was speaking, the film cut once again, this time to the thought process of the boy. He was arriving home in uniform for the first time, and his mother burst into tears when she saw him, for she understood that he had joined the army. The boy started to undress, but then he heard the orator booming in the background – "Are your fathers so forgetful of the fatherland that they would let it perish rather than you?" – and suddenly his own father was looking at him with pride. The film

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<sup>50</sup> Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente*, ed., Fröhlich, K.G. Saur, Munich, 1987, September 2, 1929, 1, 417.

<sup>51</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front*, dir. Lewis Milestone, Universal, 1930.

cut one last time from this dream sequence back to the boy sitting in the classroom, and he was obviously becoming convinced.

The orator went through the doubts of the other boys, and he went through their hopes as well. “Is the honor of wearing a uniform something from which we should run,” he asked, as one boy imagined the girls in the town falling in love with him because he was all dressed up. “And if our young ladies glory in those who wear it, is that anything to be *ashamed* of,” he said, and the camera shifted back to the boy in the classroom, revealing that he was becoming convinced too.

Now the orator was gaining momentum. As the film cut more and more quickly between him and his audience, he actually started to appear larger in the frame. When he was absolutely convinced of himself, he appeared in an extreme close-up, and asked one of the boys what he was going to do. “I’ll go,” the boy replied. “I wanna go,” said another. Soon everyone was agreeing to go, and the teacher was satisfied. “Follow me! Enlist!” he screamed. “No more classes,” the boys yelled in response, and then everything turned into chaos.

“Nearly always,” Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf*, “I faced an assemblage of people who believed the opposite of what I wanted to say, and wanted the opposite of what I believed. Then it was the work of two hours to lift two or three thousand people out of a previous conviction, blow by blow to shatter the foundation of their previous opinions, and finally... I had before me a surging mass full of the holiest indignation and boundless wrath.”<sup>52</sup>

The first major scene of *All Quiet* revealed the power of oratory – not only revealed it but broke it up, analyzed it, showed how it worked. The scene was like a movie version of Hitler’s chapter on the spoken word. But a single moment from it unsettled everything. Just when the teacher was getting to the end of his speech, he said quietly, “I believe it will be a quick war, that there will be few losses.” A few minutes later the boys were all marching off to enlist.

From that point on, the film shifted gears. At the training barracks the boys’ superior officer, Sergeant Himmelstoss, drilled them ruthlessly and ordered them to crouch in mud for no reason at all; upon arriving on the battlefield and hearing the first small explosion they wet their pants; during a bombardment, one boy temporarily lost his sight, went hysterical, and ran into the enemy’s line of fire; later, when they were trapped in a small hut and the ceiling started to collapse from more bombing, another boy did the same; they constantly went without food, and on one occasion became wildly excited when they spotted some rats to eat; they shot hundreds of enemy soldiers from a distance and fought hundreds of others in the trenches; and if they were lucky enough to survive all that, they almost certainly ended up in a hospital where they had body parts amputated. From the moment they left the classroom, every image of the film argued against the orator’s original claim that war was honorable, and showed instead that it was hell.

And then one of the few boys still alive, Paul Bäumer, was granted a week’s leave to visit his family back home. As he walked through the town in a daze everything seemed different: the shops were closed, the parades were over, the streets were empty. Occasionally he saw some horrific sight like a six-year old boy sitting on the sidewalk playing with a bayonet, but he did not react; he just kept walking towards his house, and

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<sup>52</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 466.



when his mother said she did not know him, he responded with the same blank expression. Later that day he went to the local bar so his father could show him off to his friends, and he looked on in disbelief as they got out battle maps and told him what the army needed to do. He muttered something about how it was “different out there,” but they just laughed at him, so he slipped away and wandered the streets some more. Soon he heard a voice he knew well: it was the high school teacher who had convinced him to go to the front in the first place.

“Paul,” the teacher cried out. “How are you Paul!” The teacher had been giving a speech to a new batch of students, and he was thrilled to have an actual soldier to support his argument. “Look at him,” he said – the film cutting from boy to boy, each one as impressed as the last – “sturdy and bronzed and clear-eyed, the kind of soldier that every one of you should envy.” He begged Paul to tell them how much they were needed at the front, and when Paul resisted he begged him some more, saying that it would suffice just to describe a single act of bravery or humility. The boys responded with a murmur of excitement, so finally Paul turned to address them.

But it was a disappointing speech. Unlike the teacher, who spoke with great enthusiasm, Paul just slumped himself against the desk, and said that for him the war was about trying not to get killed. The film cut to a shot of the boys reacting with disbelief, and then to the teacher trying to respond, and that was when Paul woke up. He looked into his teacher’s eyes and argued against everything he stood for. It wasn’t delightful and sweet to die for the fatherland; it was dirty and painful. When the teacher protested, Paul looked at the boys. “He tells you, *Go out and die*” – and then, turning back to the teacher – “OH, BUT IF YOU PARDON ME, IT’S EASIER TO SAY ‘GO OUT AND DIE’ THAN IT IS TO DO IT!” Someone in the classroom branded Paul a coward, so he turned back to the boys one last time – “AND IT’S EASIER TO SAY IT THAN TO WATCH IT HAPPEN!” Then he started ranting about the horrible conditions on the front, but the German censors were shocked by this part of the speech, and they cut it from the print.

“It’s easier to say it than to watch it happen”: no line could better summarize the point of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The film began with a speaker encouraging innocent boys to enlist, and then forced the viewer to sit through the consequences – horrific images of death and destruction. From beginning to end, it was nothing less than film’s declaration of war on the spoken word.

All around the world, people who saw *All Quiet* recognized the absolute power of the new sound and moving image technologies. To a greater extent than ever before, the picture allowed audiences “to watch it happen” – to witness an utterly convincing representation of armed combat. “It brought the war back to me as nothing has ever done since 1918,” one commentator said. Like most people, he felt that the picture showed the horrors of warfare and the similarity of the war experience for everyone.<sup>53</sup> From Hitler’s perspective, however, the realism of the picture was its biggest danger. Unlike the hate films that simply offered stereotypes of German civilians and soldiers, *All Quiet* was providing the first coherent, believable portrayal of the German experience of the War. And this account was completely at odds with his version in *Mein Kampf*. Instead of the fond memory of drilling with “dear comrades,” the early days at the military academy

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<sup>53</sup> Modris Eksteins, “War, Memory, and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*,” *Central European History*, March 1980, 62-63.

were humiliating for everyone; instead of “Deutschland über alles” playing over the first battle scene, the boys wet their pants; instead of becoming “calm and determined old soldiers,” they felt terrible human fear; instead of honor and courage, there was only defeat. When Hitler and Paul Bäumer returned home, they both felt deeply disoriented, but Paul “bragged about [his] own cowardice” in just the way Hitler found so disgraceful. *All Quiet* was giving the very interpretation of the War that Hitler despised, and in a more compelling way than he ever could.

Finally, the film was even attacking Hitler’s arguments about war propaganda. In a scene that was cut from the German version, a group of soldiers had a discussion about who was responsible for the outbreak of hostilities. The typical arguments were given – the French started it, the English started it – and then one of Paul’s friends came up with a different possibility.

“I think maybe the Kaiser wanted a war,” he said.

“I don’t see that,” someone else replied. “The Kaiser’s got everything he needs.”

“Well he never had a war before. Every full-grown emperor needs a war to make him famous. Why, that’s history!”

In other words: there were no enemy leaflets. If anyone came up with the idea of blaming the Kaiser, the Germans did.

And yet even though the movie argued that Germany lost the World War on the battlefield, and that propaganda played no part at all, and that the spoken word was a dangerous weapon in the hands of a demagogue – in short, even though *All Quiet* argued against almost everything Hitler stood for – he still would never have taken any action if it were not for one final development. In the elections of September 1930, just when Universal Pictures submitted *All Quiet* to the censors, the National Socialists made landslide gains in the Reichstag, increasing their representation from 12 to 107 seats.<sup>54</sup> Hitler was no longer the nobody intending to take over the state by force as he attempted in the failed putsch of 1923. He was a key political figure. But while he had given up on the idea of taking over the German state by force, he was ready and willing to use force to take over the German screen. He was about to undertake the culture putsch.

On Friday December 5, 1930, the first public performance of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in Germany was scheduled to take place at a cinema in Berlin called the Mozartsaal. The National Socialists had purchased around 300 tickets, or one-third of the total seats, for the 7 p.m. showing, and many more party members were waiting outside. Hitler was not present himself, possibly because he had almost been shot at the original putsch, but he sent Goebbels to act on his behalf. The trouble began almost immediately. As the teacher gave the speech persuading his students to go to war, a few people in the audience started to shout. When the German troops were forced to retreat from the French, the shouting became more distinct: “German soldiers had courage. It’s a disgrace that such an insulting film was made in America!” “Down with the hunger government which permits such a film!” Because of the disruptions, the projectionist was forced to switch off the film. The house lights went on, and Goebbels gave a speech from the front row of the balcony where the Nazis were congregating. His comrades waited for him to finish, then threw stink bombs and sneeze powder into the crowd. White mice were also

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<sup>54</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 333.

seen scurrying about. Everyone rushed for the exits, and the demonstrations continued outside for several hours.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the putsch of 1923, that led to Hitler's imprisonment, these actions met with significant popular approval, especially from the right and the Catholic Center. Everything seemed to go in the Nazis' favor in the days that followed. Immediately after the riots, on Saturday December 6, the matter was brought up on the Reichstag, and a representative for the German Nationalist Party sided with Hitler. On Sunday, *All Quiet* resumed at the Mozartsaal under heavy police protection, and on Monday the Nazis responded with further demonstrations and violence. On Tuesday, both the German Federation of Cinema Owners and the main student association of the University of Berlin spoke out against the film. On Wednesday, police president Grzesinski of Berlin, who was a Social Democrat, pronounced a ban on all open-air demonstrations, and the main Nazi newspaper responded, "Grzesinski is protecting the Jewish film of shame!" Later that day, in what was probably an unprecedented affair, the members of the German cabinet watched *All Quiet* at the offices of the film board. Up to that point the minister of the interior and the foreign minister had approved of the picture, and only the defense minister had objected to it.<sup>56</sup>

The situation came to a climax on Thursday December 11. Prompted by the Nazis' actions, five states – Saxony, Braunschweig, Thuringia, Württemberg, and Bavaria – had submitted petitions to ban *All Quiet on the Western Front*. At ten a.m. that day, the highest censorship board in the country convened to determine the fate of the film. Twenty-eight people were present, far more than had ever attended one of these meetings before, and more than would ever attend again. The board consisted of Dr. Ernst Seeger, chief German censor; Otto Schubert, a representative of the film industry; Dr. Paul Baecker, editor of an agrarian nationalist newspaper; Professor Hinderer, a theologian; and Miss Reinhardt, a schoolteacher and sister of the late general Walter Reinhardt. Also in attendance were representatives from the five protesting state governments, and delegates from the defense, interior, and foreign ministries. The lawyer for Universal Pictures, Dr. Frankfurter, was accompanied by a retired general and two film directors.<sup>57</sup>

Everyone squeezed into the projection room, and for the second day in a row *All Quiet* was screened. Seeger then asked the complainants from the state governments why they had brought the film up for appeal. Each representative gave his own statement, and Seeger counted a total of three objections: the film harmed the German image; it endangered public order by driving people to radicalism; and if it were permitted, then the rest of the world would think that Germany approved of the even more offensive version playing abroad.<sup>58</sup>

Seeger then turned to the delegate from the defense ministry, naval lieutenant von Baumbach, and asked him to comment on the first objection. Von Baumbach replied that his ministry had kept an eye on the film from the beginning. In April 1930, the German consul general in San Francisco had registered an official complaint with Universal

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<sup>55</sup> Eksteins, "War Memory, and Politics," 71-72.

<sup>56</sup> Eksteins, "War, Memory, and Politics," 72-75.

<sup>57</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, December 11, 1930, Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt, 1-2; Eksteins, "War, Memory, and Politics," 75.

<sup>58</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, 4-9.

Pictures. And in November, the defense ministry had strongly recommended that the movie be banned in Germany. He admitted that the nations of the world had been working hard to establish friendly relations with Germany over the past decade, but there was one area that the spirit of Locarno had failed to penetrate: “the area of film!” In fact, the Americans were using even more refined methods to harm the German image than before. In contrast to their primitive hate pictures from the war, they were now pretending to have the best of intentions, and always including a few decent German characters in their productions – but they still made the German army look ridiculous, brutal, and cowardly. Of course, when an army of ten million people fights a war for four years, anything can happen. But the German soldiers in this picture were constantly wailing in fear; their faces were always distorted; they ate and drank like wild animals; and they only became lively when they beat a few rats to death. Such elaborate images might seem acceptable on the surface, but they were detrimental to Germany, and if Carl Laemmle of Universal Pictures were dismayed by this opinion, someone should ask him “Why then did you make a war film that couldn’t play in the same version in Germany as in the rest of the world?”<sup>59</sup>

The representative from the interior ministry, Dr. Hoche, addressed the second objection. He said that *All Quiet* contained so many images of death and destruction that it left spectators feeling embarrassed and awkward. In calmer times this might not have been a problem. But the fate of the film could not be determined in a vacuum. The German people were going through a moment of deep psychological distress and inner conflict. The pressure of war debts and the economic crisis were mounting. The problem was not that a few extremist groups were artificially stirring up excitement; rather, the film had seized on the genuine anxiety of a much larger group of people. In order to preserve public order, it should be taken out of circulation in Germany.<sup>60</sup>

All this was more than enough for Seeger. He had no desire to go through every single objection against *All Quiet*. If he could just show that the film broke one aspect of the law, they could all go home. He began his judgment by admitting that the picture had definite pacifist tendencies. But that hardly meant it did not harm the German image or endanger public order. *All Quiet* contained stereotypes that were simply more disguised than the ones in the previous hate films. Sergeant Himmelstoss’s mean action of dunking the boys in the mud represented untamed German aggression, and gave the spectator the impression that Germany was responsible for the outbreak of hostilities. And whereas the French soldiers went to their deaths quietly, the Germans were constantly howling and shrieking with fear. Therefore *All Quiet* was not an honest representation of the War but a representation of German aggression and German defeat. Of course the public had reacted disapprovingly. Regardless of anyone’s political affiliation, the picture offended a whole generation of German people who had suffered so terribly throughout the war. Seeger banned *All Quiet* on the grounds that it harmed the German image, and said there was no need to consider the matter any further.<sup>61</sup>

The Nazis were jubilant. “Ours the victory!” proclaimed *Der Angriff*, Goebbels’ personal newspaper. On the other hand, virtually everyone on the left was outraged. Like most people around the world, they considered *All Quiet* a pacifist film, and they

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<sup>59</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, 9-13.

<sup>60</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, 16-19.

<sup>61</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, 19-25.

interpreted the ban to mean that Germany was now forbidden to value peace over war. Along with most foreign commentators, they felt that this was the government's first major capitulation to Hitler and his biggest victory to date. One journalist ended his report on a prophetic note: "The appointed guardians of the republic resemble King Lear, who rejects his faithful child and gives his evil daughter his land and fortune. May heaven protect the German republic from the fate of Lear!"<sup>62</sup>

But that was not the end of the story. Something else happened that day that turned out to have even more far-reaching consequences than the actual banning of the film. After all, everyone going into the meeting knew that the result was a foregone conclusion. The board members were deeply conservative, and the whole affair had been carefully orchestrated from start to finish. Even before the decision was announced, Dr. Frankfurter, the lawyer for Universal Pictures, had revealed that he was pulling the film from circulation in Germany anyway. His company had consulted with the relevant government authorities, and the two groups had reached an agreement that they would stick to no matter what the censorship board decided.<sup>63</sup> Only at one point in the meeting did something unexpected occur. Poor Dr. Frankfurter got a rude shock.

He had known that the defense ministry was going to oppose the film. And given all the disruptions that had occurred over the past few days, he was sure that the ministry of the interior would oppose it as well. The Foreign Office, on the other hand, had always been the American studios' first point of contact in Germany. For years the two groups had worked closely together, and for the most part they had found ways of resolving their differences. The defense ministry was right that the consul general in San Francisco, Mr. von Hentig, had seen *All Quiet* back in April 1930, but far from objecting to it, he had given it the green light. The Americans had recognized their good relations with the Foreign Office even then. "Herr von Hentig is an intelligent and cultured German," one studio representative wrote, "and it is possible that because of these attributes his opinion is not indicative of the average stratum of German intelligence."<sup>64</sup> Six months later the Foreign Office had supported Universal Pictures once again by pushing for the approval of *All Quiet* in Germany. Dr. Frankfurter had heard rumors that the situation was different now. But he did not think that the Foreign Office would end up opposing a film that promoted peace and diplomacy over war and death.

Legation minister Sievers gave the report. Unlike the other two representatives whose speeches were long and drawn-out, his statement consisted of only a few sentences. "The Foreign Office's original approval of the film was based on the materials available at the time," he said. "In the meantime the Foreign Office has received communications from abroad that identify the film's detrimental effect on the German image. It has therefore come to the conclusion that the film must be seen as detrimental to the German image. The Foreign Office therefore recommends banning the film."<sup>65</sup>

It was an absurd moment. Dr. Frankfurter could hardly believe what had just happened. *Communications from abroad?* What was the minister talking about? Dr. Frankfurter had hardly said a word up to this point, but now he found that he could not

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<sup>62</sup> Eksteins, "War, Memory, and Politics," 77-8.

<sup>63</sup> Oberprüfstelle Report 1254, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Colonel Joy's Resume, February 15, 1930 and April 8, 1930, PCA file for *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles.

<sup>65</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 1254, 13-4.

hold back. He asked the minister when these so-called communications were received, and what they were.<sup>66</sup>

"The communications were received in the time between the original inspection of the film and the one occurring today," Sievers replied. "They consist of official reports and private information that show how the reception of the film harms the German image."

"Am I right in assuming that these communications are concerned only with the foreign version of the film?"

"Because the reports came from abroad, they can only be based on the version being shown there. However, the writers of the reports all emphasize that they are concerned not with particular moments but with the overall tendency of the film."

"What countries do these reports come from?"

"I cannot give particulars, since the Foreign Office is in touch with all European and foreign countries. The reports come mainly from America and England."

Dr. Frankfurter changed the subject. "Today's morning papers give the impression that the Foreign Minister has seen the current version of the film," he said.

"I know nothing about that," replied Sievers.

"Did the Foreign Office change its opinion of the film as a result of orders from higher up?"

Seeger interjected. The question was inadmissible because it concerned the internal workings of the Foreign Office.

Dr. Frankfurter tried a different approach. "When did the Foreign Office change its position on the film," he asked.

"I refuse to answer that question."

"Is it that you don't want to answer it or that you can't answer it?"

"Both."

"Did the Foreign Office change its position after the first censorship meeting in Berlin?"

"Yes, after the meeting in Berlin."

Seeger interrupted again. He would allow no further questions in this direction.

"I have just one more question," said Dr. Frankfurter. "Something seems to be missing in the representative's statement, namely the opinion. When the Foreign Office changes its statement like this, then it might provide us with a reason."

But Sievers had understood that Seeger was on his side. "I have nothing further to say," he replied. And with that, the interrogation was complete.

As it turned out, none of this had any bearing on the case. Dr. Frankfurter had established that the communications from abroad were based on foreign versions of the film, and the law was only concerned with the version playing in Germany. Seivers' testimony had been close to worthless. Still, his admission that there had been communications from abroad was very revealing. He was saying that the scandal surrounding *All Quiet* had led the various German consulates and embassies to investigate the impact of the film in their respective countries. In other words the Foreign Office was doing something more intrusive than anything the defense or interior ministries had imagined: it was using its diplomatic privileges to determine whether *All*

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<sup>66</sup> The following conversation is a direct translation from Oberprüfstelle report 1254, 14-6.

*Quiet* harmed the German image outside the German border. This was an unprecedented development, and it set into motion a whole new series of events.

Back in Hollywood, the founder of Universal Pictures, Carl Laemmle, was deeply troubled by the controversy surrounding his picture. He had been born in Germany, and he wanted *All Quiet* to be shown in his homeland. After a few days of indecision he sent a telegram to the head of the biggest media empire in the United States, William Randolph Hearst. "Would greatly appreciate your aid in support of my picture 'All Quiet On The Western Front' now threatened by Hitler party in Germany," he wrote. "If you feel you can conscientiously do so comment appearing over your signature in the Hearst press would be of immeasurable help."<sup>67</sup>

Hearst knew a good story when he saw one. On Friday December 12, the day after *All Quiet* was banned in Germany, he released an editorial that appeared on the front page of every one of his newspapers. He made sure to defend *All Quiet* as a pacifist film. But in typical Hearst fashion he went on to promote his own agenda. For years he had been lashing out against France for the unfair terms of the Versailles Treaty. Now he said that despite this massive obstacle, Germany should still fight for peace. "France will want her last pound of flesh, of course. France will be supremely selfish. That is her nature," he wrote. Nevertheless "Germany should not allow herself to be forced into war either by those without her boundaries who are hostile to her, or by those within her confines who mean well but think badly."<sup>68</sup>

The editorial did not good, of course. Hearst was only interested in helping Hearst. Laemmle was forced to adopt other measures. In June 1931 his company resubmitted *All Quiet* to the German censorship authorities, and it was approved only for screening in front of war veterans' associations and world peace organizations.<sup>69</sup> In August he made a trip to Europe himself to promote a new, considerably edited version of the film. Although he did not set foot on his native soil, he sent the print to his employees in Berlin, who renewed their talks with the Foreign Office. Meanwhile he awaited the results in Paris. After much deliberation, the Foreign Office agreed to support *All Quiet* for general screening in Germany under one condition. Laemmle would have to tell the branches of Universal Pictures all around the world to make the same cuts to their copies of the film. Late in the summer, Laemmle informed his employees in Berlin that he was ready to cooperate with the request.<sup>70</sup>

The approval of *All Quiet* proceeded smoothly. Legation Minister Sievers said that he now supported the release of the picture, and it went on to become one of the biggest hits of the year in Germany.<sup>71</sup> The fate of the film abroad was another story. Sievers wanted to make sure that Universal Pictures upheld its part of the bargain, so he wrote to every German consulate and embassy where *All Quiet* was playing, and informed them of eight deletions that Laemmle had agreed to make. Some of the changes were relatively minor: the dunking of the recruits in the mud, for example, was now only

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<sup>67</sup> Laemmle to Hearst, December 10, 1930, 9:10 a.m.; Laemmle to Hearst, December 10, 1930, 9:16 a.m., William Randolph Hearst Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>68</sup> Hearst, "Peace and Good Will," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 12, 1930.

<sup>69</sup> Filmprüfstelle Report 29102, June 8, 1931, Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt, 1-2

<sup>70</sup> Deutsche Universal to Foreign Office, August 28, 1931, German Legation in Lisbon, 134/2, Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin.

<sup>71</sup> Eksteins, "War, Memory, and Politics, 82; *Film Daily*, September 3, 1931; Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939-1990*, Routledge, New York, 1991, 24.

to be shown once. Others were much more substantial, especially the deletions numbered four through seven:

4. During the soldiers' conversation about the causes and development of the war, the remark that every emperor must have his war.
5. Paul Bäumer's address to his classmates: "It is dirty and painful to die for the fatherland."
6. The whole story around this scene. The schoolboys and the teacher no longer appear in the second half of the film.
7. Paul Bäumer's meeting in the bar with the old fighters during his holiday.

Sievers requested that a representative from every German consulate and embassy go out and see the film, and report back to him if any of the above deletions had not been made.<sup>72</sup>

The first person to discover a problem was an employee of the German embassy in Paris. In mid-November he saw *All Quiet* at a cinema appropriately situated on the Avenue de la Grande Armée, and he noticed that both the offensive remarks about the Kaiser and the second classroom scene remained.<sup>73</sup> When Sievers found out about this, he complained to Universal Pictures, and the company's German employees were "extremely embarrassed": "We politely ask you – in the name of our president, Mr. Carl Laemmle – to accept our assurance that this up-to-now unexplained oversight is an isolated incident, and it will never happen again."<sup>74</sup>

That turned out to be wishful thinking, for the next month the old version of *All Quiet* was still playing in London and San Francisco. This time other people got involved. The consul general in San Francisco, Mr. von Hentig – the same man who had approved of the picture 18 months earlier – informed the new consul in Los Angeles, Dr. Gustave Struve, that he had just seen the offensive version.<sup>75</sup> And naturally enough Dr. Struve went to his first point of contact in Los Angeles – not Universal Pictures, but the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. The MPPDA was an independent body that made censorship recommendations to the studios and acted as their official representatives, but in this case there was a problem. When Dr. Struve complained that scenes "#3,5,6, &7" were still being screened in San Francisco, the MPPDA had no idea what he was talking about.<sup>76</sup> The head of the foreign department, Frederick Herron, went through all his correspondence and found no reference to the eight scenes that should have been deleted. "The only record we have as to objectionable scenes, is relative to the school scene in which the teacher is urging his class to join the colors; the soap-box politician scene in which they discuss how the war should be conducted; and the sergeant drilling the recruits in more or less of a severe manner. None of these do I consider legitimate objections and I said so at the time," he wrote. "I am rather curious to know just what Dr. Struve is objecting to in this picture at the present time. You might casually

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<sup>72</sup> Sievers to German Legation in Lisbon, October 7, 1931, German Legation in Lisbon, 134/2, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>73</sup> German Embassy in Paris to Foreign Office, November 14, 1931, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>74</sup> Deutsche Universal to Foreign Office, November 27, 1931, German Embassy in Paris, 2281, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>75</sup> Resume, December 28, 1931, PCA File for *All Quiet*.

<sup>76</sup> G.A. Struve to Wilson, December 29, 1931, PCA File for *All Quiet*.



drop a remark to him that perhaps if the members of the German government in Berlin would keep their promises to our representatives, and to the representatives of this office, instead of breaking such promises as they have done numerous times in the past, we would get along a little better.”<sup>77</sup>

Herron was obviously angry, but his anger was misdirected, for Dr. Struve was totally right on this occasion. Universal Pictures had agreed to make the eight requested deletions. The real problem was that Carl Laemmle had gone over the heads of the MPPDA when he made the deal in the first place. If he had consulted with Herron, he would have been told that *All Quiet* was unobjectionable in its original form and that under no circumstances should he cut the picture abroad just to assure its release in Germany. But while the MPPDA wanted Universal Pictures to stand up to the Germans, Laemmle wanted to sell his picture, and if that meant cutting the scenes to which the Foreign Office objected, then so be it. Business was business.

It proved to be a fatal mistake. Over the next few months, Laemmle observed Hitler’s rise and became increasingly nervous about the situation in Germany. In January 1932 he was so alarmed that he wrote once again to Hearst. This time he was concerned for much more than the fate of his film. “I address you on a subject which I firmly believe is not only of great concern to my own race but also to millions of Gentiles, throughout the world,” he wrote.

Speaking as an individual, I have been greatly worried for some time about the members of my own family in Germany, so much so that I have already provided the means to enable them to leave the country on short notice and for their subsequent maintenance. My present concern, therefore, is not so much for those dear to me personally, as much as it is for those less fortunate members of my race who would necessarily be at the mercy of fierce racial hatreds.

I might be wrong, and I pray to God that I am, but I am almost certain that Hitler’s rise to power, because of his obvious militant attitude toward the Jews, would be the signal for a general physical onslaught on many thousands of defenseless Jewish men, women, and children in Germany, and possibly in Central Europe as well, unless something is done soon to definitely establish Hitler’s personal responsibility in the eyes of the outside world.<sup>78</sup>

This time Hearst wrote no editorial. Nor did he even send Laemmle a reply. He had become fascinated with Hitler, and he was not willing to take a stance just yet.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile Laemmle continued to help Jews get out of Germany. He spent vast amounts of time convincing American immigration authorities that he could provide for the sustenance of individual Jews. When the United States Government started denying his

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<sup>77</sup> Herron to Joy, January 11, 1932, PCA File for *All Quiet*.

<sup>78</sup> Laemmle to Hearst, January 18, 1932, William Randolph Hearst Papers.

<sup>79</sup> A couple of years later, when Hitler personally invited Hearst to the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, he accepted and stayed at the same hotel as von Ribbentrop, Himmler, Heydrich, and Goering. After the festivities he interviewed Hitler. When rumors leaked out about secret deals between the two men, he refuted the charges. “The question of whether I should see Hitler and what I should say to Hitler,” he added, “was discussed in general with Mr. Louis B. Mayer before the interview took place.” Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies*, Columbia University Press, New York, 304-325.

requests, he approached other potential benefactors. By the time of his death, he had helped at least 300 people get out of Germany.<sup>80</sup>

And yet at precisely the moment that Laemmle was embarking on his crusade, his employees were capitulating to the demands of the German government. In the first few months of 1932, the Foreign Office received word that there were problems with the versions of *All Quiet* playing in San Salvador and Spain. The company apologized with the assurance that “The movietone prints are being treated as requested.”<sup>81</sup> Midway through the year, the Foreign Office was satisfied that Carl Laemmle had kept his part of the bargain. The culture putsch had succeeded not just in Germany but all around the world.

Hitler’s decision to halt the screening of *All Quiet on the Western Front* in Berlin set off a train of events that lasted an entire decade. Not just Universal Pictures but all the Hollywood studios started making deep concessions to the German government, and when the Nazis attained power in January 1933 that practice was set in stone. The theory of film that Hitler outlined in *Mein Kampf* therefore had its most significant implications in the United States. But Hitler of course applied his theory to the production of films in Germany as well, so before turning to the main story, let us take one final look at the Führer himself.

Shortly after attaining power in Germany, Hitler commissioned the brilliant female director Leni Riefenstahl to record the Nuremberg Rally of 1934, and the result was *Triumph of the Will*, the Nazis’ most celebrated propaganda picture. It was a film about an orator’s obsession with film. In Hitler’s very first speech – a brief address to the men representing the German Labor Service – he could not resist commenting on the movie camera that was in front of him. He began in a predictable manner, telling the men that this was the first-ever review of their organization, and that he valued their work immensely. Then he said something exceptional: “Know that today you are not only being seen by the thousands in Nuremberg, but by *all* of Germany – which also sees you here for the first time today!” It was an ambiguous remark: in one sense, he was simply pointing out that as Führer, he represented the entire German nation. In another, he was commenting from within the film on just what the film was doing. He was saying that thanks to this new technology, the official review of the Labor Service could now be seen by everyone in Germany.<sup>82</sup>

As Hitler knew well, the movie camera was doing even more than that. In arranging to have his speeches recorded for a feature film, he was passing them on not just to the rest of Germany but to all posterity. Along with the surviving newsreels, *Triumph of the Will* remains the best document we have of Hitler’s oratorical abilities. And yet for some reason historians have not generally used these visual materials to examine Hitler’s mass appeal. By bracketing Riefenstahl’s flourishes for the moment, we

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<sup>80</sup> Udo Bayer, “Laemmle’s List: Carl Laemmle’s Affidavits for Jewish Refugees,” *Film History*, 10, 1998, 501-521.

<sup>81</sup> Deutsche Universal to Foreign Office, March 10, 1932, German Embassy in Rome, 822, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>82</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl, Leni Riefenstahl-Produktion/Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, 1935.

can observe in her picture some of the techniques that Hitler used to captivate his audiences.

It might be tempting to think of Hitler's speeches as the unrestrained expression of spontaneous emotion. In fact the opposite was the case. From beginning to end, his performances were carefully calculated to achieve the greatest possible effect on his audience. In the climactic address of *Triumph of the Will*, for example, he started out hesitantly, nervously, as if he thought he were about to fail. For a few uncomfortable moments he looked as if he had nothing to say at all. He stared down at the podium, then back up at the audience, and finally started mumbling that the ceremonies were coming to an end. His voice contained no emotion; his body remained still. Of course *he* was aware of the storm that was about to break. But he wanted to make his audience worry a little first. He was using a technique he had described in *Mein Kampf* – going through the audience's doubts one by one in order to convert them – only in this case he was making them doubt his ability to finish the speech. It was a clever way of implicating the audience in his performance so they would feel they were going through the journey with him.

Hitler could of course scream wildly, but he was capable of restraining himself as well; he could use his hands in a highly expressive manner, but he only waved them about when he was trying to enforce a point. Hitler never lost control of his senses or revealed himself to his audience. He knew instead that his phases needed to be carefully constructed; that the pause was as important as the word; and that the end of an argument was the most important part of all. He built up his audience's expectations by saying that once upon a time his enemies used to purge the Nazi Party of its lesser elements. Then, after giving them time to digest this statement, he told them that the same duty now fell to the Nazi Party itself. "Today we must examine ourselves and remove the elements that have become bad, and therefore" – suddenly shaking his head and indicating his disapproval with his hand – "*do not belong to us.*" In fact, at such moments Hitler was hardly saying anything at all. But the content was no longer the point. By signifying that he had reached the end of an argument, he was giving his audience a cue to applaud.

Hitler cultivated a special relationship with the people listening to him: he showed them no respect whatsoever. He stood in front of them with a frown plastered on his face, and no matter how excited he made them, no matter how enthusiastically they welcomed his words, at no point did he give the slightest indication that it affected him. He only changed his expression if it served his own argument. "Once our enemies worried us and persecuted us," he said, smiling to show that his enemies did not worry him anymore. Then he resumed his normal pose, and when his audience applauded once again, he still only looked at them with indifference or disgust. At other times he acted as if the applause was interrupting him, and he held up his hands to cut it off. On the odd occasion that this did not succeed, he simply kept his hands in the air and waited for his audience to calm down. And at the end of a speech, when he knew the most tumultuous applause was coming, he turned away, as if to say that he had no need for it at all.

These were the main techniques that Hitler employed in front of his audiences, and they have been preserved on film for all to see. But unlike the newsreels that merely captured Hitler's speeches, *Triumph of the Will* used filmic techniques to transform them and make them more than they actually were. For years people have argued about whether or not *Triumph of the Will* was a piece of propaganda. Admittedly the picture

contained no clear ideological argument, for Hitler's speeches at the Nuremberg Rally of 1934 bore no trace of anti-Semitism. And if certain commentators have seen its images – of an ideal community, of life as art – as a true fascist aesthetics, that at least was not Hitler's understanding.<sup>83</sup> There was no doubt, however, that *Triumph of the Will* was a propaganda film at the level of its *form*. To take a single example: when Hitler greeted the men from the Labor Service, they chanted together to show that they were united. "One people," they said, and the film showed an image of the mass; "One leader," and it cut to Hitler; "One Reich," and it displayed the traditional German eagle; "Germany!" and it ended with a shot of the swastika. This was no simple reproduction of the events of the day. Riefenstahl was making deliberate choices of what to show and when to show it to empower the Nazi Party. Her dramatic depiction of Hitler's speeches would turn out to be the most pro-Nazi part of all.

As we have seen, Hitler's technique of starting out slowly and building up to an explosion was based on his theory of the spoken word in *Mein Kampf*. Riefenstahl noticed this technique and replicated it in her picture. She began *Triumph of the Will* as a kind of silent film; she switched to a talkie as various Nazi leaders gave brief addresses; finally Hitler broke his own silence with a powerful speech. This gradual build-up of sound had a dramatic effect. When Hitler arrived in Nuremberg, he was shaking hands with various people and occasionally chatting with them, but their conversations were inaudible. *What is the Führer saying*, the viewer was meant to wonder. Then Hitler shook hands with senior SA and SS officials, and conveniently he did not say a word. The result was that the viewer only heard Hitler speak when he was in front of the masses, and this made him seem more mysterious than he actually was.<sup>84</sup> Riefenstahl used the camera to the same end. She made sure always to cut from the intense final moments of his speeches to the crowd going wild in response. She varied close-ups of Hitler with extreme long shots of the crowd to emphasize his power over them. And she took long shots with Hitler in the frame from low points in the crowd so he appeared to be towering above them. Riefenstahl was striving for the same effect every time. Hitler cultivated a mystical power over the masses, and she sought to mystify him even further.<sup>85</sup>

Of course this was not the first time that a film had enhanced the power of the spoken word. The opening scene of *All Quiet on the Western Front* had done just that. But whereas *All Quiet* went on to attack the orator with the camera, in *Triumph of the Will* the camera remained faithful, loving, and reverent throughout. This was no coincidence: Hitler was so deeply offended by the earlier picture that he had always

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<sup>83</sup> Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975. Reprinted in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1980, 73-105.

<sup>84</sup> This filmic strategy also fit perfectly with Hitler's own abilities. "I must have a crowd when I speak," he once confided to a friend. "In a small intimate circle I never know what to say." Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936*, 133.

<sup>85</sup> A few years later she did the opposite. In 1936 she filmed the Olympic Games in Berlin, and Hitler was present for many of the events. Unlike *Triumph of the Will*, in which Hitler separated himself from the crowd, in *The Olympiad* he was part of it, an ordinary spectator. As he watched the various performances of the German athletes, he had his usual reactions, and in a few seconds of film that it is hard to believe exist, Riefenstahl captured them. When a German contender made a winning hammer throw, she showed "good": Hitler applauding and smiling with glee. When one of the German athletes dropped the baton in a relay, she showed "bad": Hitler smashing his hand on his knee and muttering some angry words to Goebbels. The only reaction Riefenstahl did not show was "switched off." That one Hitler reserved for special occasions. *The Olympiad*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl, Olympia Film, 1938.

intended to respond to it. And the scars were definitely visible. *All Quiet* ended with German soldiers marching silently towards their graves; *Triumph of the Will* ended with SA men marching loudly and forcefully towards the camera. Nevertheless, in one crucial sense the American picture was actually more faithful to Hitler's arguments than the German one. As he himself had said, the whole aim of the spoken word was to convert an audience of doubters into staunch believers. While that was just what happened in the first classroom scene of *All Quiet*, in *Triumph of the Will* the crowds were already convinced before the filming began. In one famous scene, Hitler went through the doubts of the SA, telling them he was not trying to dissolve their organization, but it was inconceivable that they would show any resistance in the first place. The audience watching Hitler's final address rose from their seats in the middle of his speech to show that they were becoming convinced, but they were all committed Nazis already. Despite the sheer grandiosity of *Triumph of the Will*, the film did not actually show the power of the spoken word. Hitler was reenacting a process which had inspired him so much in the past, but now it was nothing more than an empty spectacle.

Six years later, Charlie Chaplin responded to Hitler in Hollywood's first major anti-Nazi picture, *The Great Dictator*. In one respect the production was as colossal as *Triumph of the Will*: Chaplin had spent an unprecedented 559 days filming it, and he paid for it entirely out of his own pocket. In another respect Chaplin's ambitions were actually greater than Riefenstahl's: as the most famous movie star in the world, he was hoping to launch a massive political assault on the Nazis. Early in the picture he exploited his uncanny physical resemblance to Hitler to make fun of the dictator's oratorical methods. Then at the climax he gave a speech of his own that was a plea for freedom and democracy. The gravity of the situation and the weight of the cause had led Chaplin to take the momentous decision to speak on the screen for the first time. The entire film was one long build-up for him to convince the world of his views at the end.<sup>86</sup>

Chaplin's first speech was a resounding success. Like Riefenstahl, he had a deep understanding of Hitler's methods, but whereas she sought to mystify them, he sought to expose and ridicule them. It was hilarious because it was so dead-on. The dictator "Hynkel" stared at his audience with an unwavering frown, used carefully constructed hand gestures, and then, with the utmost seriousness, picked up a jug of water and poured it down his pants. His phrases were perfectly timed to achieve just the right effect, but he used words like "shitten" and "schnitzel." He was in such control of his emotions that he could express intense sadness and then suddenly announce that his emotional response was at an end. And when his arguments met with overwhelming applause, he appeared completely unmoved, and like an orchestra conductor he silenced it in a flash. Chaplin was critiquing the emptiness of Hitler's performances in *Triumph of the Will* by pointing out that the audience had not been listening to him at all.

But Chaplin wanted his audience to listen to *him*. He played two roles in *The Great Dictator* – not just Hynkel, but also a Jewish barber – and as a result of mistaken identity it was the barber who was asked to give the final speech. In setting up the scene, Chaplin revealed just how much he had learned from Hitler. After a brief introduction by Herr "Garbage," he remained fixed to his seat, terrified of addressing the crowd.

"You must speak," his friend whispered.

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<sup>86</sup> *The Great Dictator*, dir. Chaplin, United Artists, 1940; *The Tramp and the Dictator*, dir. Kevin Brownlow and Michael Kloft, BBC/Spiegel TV, 2002.

“I can’t,” Chaplin replied.

“You must – it’s our only hope.”

“Hope,” Chaplin muttered under his breath, and finally he got up to say something.

He started out quietly, almost apologizing to his audience. Then all of a sudden the little man erupted. He told them to think for themselves; to unite in the spirit of brotherhood; to put technology in the service of good rather than evil. “Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world,” he said. He was following Hitler’s methods, to the point of commenting on the power of film from within the film, only he was doing so to destroy Hitler.

But then something went wrong. This incredibly gifted actor, who had studied Hitler’s oratorical methods so carefully, was becoming too emotional. As he told his audience what a wonderful world they could live in, he lost all control of his senses, and an involuntary body movement took over: his head started to twitch. For several uncomfortable minutes, the camera captured a speech by a man who was no orator. He was rambling, leaving no space between his words; he was expressionless, with his arms fixed by his side; and at the center of the screen was that horrible twitching head. When at last he was done, he looked at the audience as if he were desperately seeking their approval, and the film cut to an entirely unconvincing shot of their applause. Not only did Chaplin lack Hitler’s oratorical abilities; he also had none of Riefenstahl’s technique in capturing oratory.

Years later a copy of *The Great Dictator* was found in the official Nazi collection, but if Hitler ever saw it, he probably would have laughed at the incompetence of that final scene.<sup>87</sup> Still, he would have respected the attempt. He had not forgotten what he had said in *Mein Kampf*. The English and Americans understood the value of propaganda in wartime. It was the Germans who had blundered during the previous crisis. Back then he had imagined how he would have done things differently had he been in charge. Now he had the chance to put his theory to the test. From the earliest signs of German aggression – which he recognized, since they were his own – Hitler personally supervised the national propaganda effort. This time film played a much greater role than before.

Hitler’s first radical departure from the mainstream nationalist foreign agenda after coming to power was his aggressive policy towards Czechoslovakia. In May 1938 the Czech army mobilized, and a few days later there were reports of German troop movements near the Czech border. Over the next months Hitler prepared for a full-scale war with Czechoslovakia, and hostilities were only averted through diplomatic intervention. On September 15 and 22, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain travelled to Germany to hold talks with Hitler.<sup>88</sup> On the morning of October 30, Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain, and Édouard Daladier carved up Czechoslovakia at the notorious conference in Munich.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Reichsfilmarchiv to Goebbels, August 15, 1944, *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*, R55/665, Bundesarchiv Berlin.

<sup>88</sup> Following the talks, Chamberlain retired to bed, and Hitler watched movies. On September 15 he watched *Die vier Gesellen*, starring Ingrid Bergman. He said it was “not good.” Daily agenda, September 15, 1938, NS 10.

<sup>89</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, Penguin, London, 2000, 87-125.

Throughout those months, the Propaganda Ministry put out regular newsreels, and copies were always sent to Hitler for inspection. One night in June, he had a particularly intense reaction to one of their productions. He first objected to their depiction of the regular news:

I do not want these newsreels only to contain shots of myself. They should include more details of actual events.

The newsreels must show new buildings, mechanical inventions, and sports events. The construction of the new congress hall in Nuremberg, for example, did not even appear *once*.

Hitler then turned to the Czech situation:

The newsreel must be edited in a politically funnier way [*Die Wochenschau muss politisch witziger gestaltet werden*] so that first you see shots of the nervous Czech preparations. Then at the end you see one great shot of the German soldiers. Not a week should go by without the latest shots of the navy, the army, and the air force. Young people are more interested in such things than anything else.<sup>90</sup>

Hitler had some very strict ideas about his newsreels. In addition to the rules about content – fewer images of himself, more images of the army – he believed that the various shots needed to be organized in a more effective, captivating way. And from years of experience giving speeches and watching movies, he had faith in his own judgment. Just as he built his speeches to a forceful conclusion, he knew that he needed to end his newsreels on a powerful note. He also understood that the trick in this case lay neither in tone nor in body movement but in editing. He therefore began with the fear of the enemy, and then cut to a single image of indefatigable German strength. He was doing just what he had promised in *Mein Kampf*: taking charge of the national propaganda to avoid a repeat of 1918.

Hitler continued this effort when the real hostilities broke out. For the duration of the war, he insisted on approving the text of newsreels before they went into circulation. His skills as an orator came in even handier here, for he was editing the voice-over that accompanied the images. But his changes involved few surprises. As usual, he corrected the Propaganda Ministry's tendency to boast whenever he was on the screen. He took a pen and struck out all the references to his military genius, leaving the sparest of

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<sup>90</sup> Hitler's adjutant to Propaganda Ministry, c. June 2, 1938, NS 10, 44, 72. The original German text reads as follows:

“Ich wünsche nicht, dass bei Veranstaltung nur Aufnahmen von meiner Person gemacht werden. Die Veranstaltung müssen in ihren Einzelheiten besser erfasst werden.

Die Wochenschau muss über die Entstehung der neuen Bauten, technischer Werke, sportlicher Veranstaltungen mehr bringen.

Der Bau der neuen Kongresshall in Nürnberg ist z.B. noch nicht *einmal* erschienen.

Die Wochenschau muss politisch witziger gestaltet werden, so z.B. jetzt Aufnahmen über die nervösen Vorbereitungen der Tschechoslowaken bringen. Zum Schluss muss dann eine Grossaufnahme des deutschen Soldaten zu sehen sein.

Es darf keine Woche vergehen, in der nicht Aufnahmen der Marine, des Heeres und der Luftwaffe erscheinen. Die Jugend ist in erster Linie an solchen Dingen interessiert.”

statements: “The Führer follows every last movement of his troops.” “The Führer with his generals at army headquarters.” The latter newsreel continued, “To the Führer’s left is General Jodl, to his right is General von Brauitsch.” He noticed there was a mistake and switched the order.<sup>91</sup>

Hitler also felt that the Propaganda Ministry tended to give too much detail, or the wrong kind of detail, about army maneuvers. The newsreel about the German invasion of Narvik, for example, showed untrained German paratroopers triumphing over highly concentrated British forces. Hitler set up the scenario in a similar way – “The enemy, with its frequently superior concentration of troops, tries to gain new ground” – but he eliminated the embarrassing detail about the German paratroopers at the end.<sup>92</sup> By cutting anything that undermined the natural conclusion of German victory, Hitler maximized the payoff every time. His most important edits therefore came at the final moments of each newsreel. In the account of the victory over France, he ended with the shots of the German army in Paris and crossed out the lines about the struggle to come.<sup>93</sup> When the German air force defeated the English over the North Atlantic, he cut the line “The general attack on England is imminent,” and simply concluded with the victory.<sup>94</sup>

Only occasionally did Hitler break his normal rules. One newsreel about the German army’s successful march through Belgium, for example, contained a short segment about prisoners of war. The narrator first gave the names of the captured French generals who were appearing on the screen. Then came the regular prisoners: “Belgians, French, Negroes, Indians, whites, blacks, browns, and yellows... a colorful mess.” Finally, in a speech that Hitler enjoyed, the narrator made fun of France’s promise of protection: “Belgium! The French army is coming to help you!” Hitler laughed at the “colorful mess” marching across the screen, and came up with a different kind of ending: “Just like in 1918, these hordes were intended to be unleashed on the German people, only this time not just on the Rhine but throughout all of Germany.”<sup>95</sup> The previous war was never far from his mind.

Hitler was at the height of his power when he edited those newsreels. As the war continued and the army experienced defeat on both fronts, he shifted to a different kind of propaganda. In the second half of 1944, just when his last reserves were being deployed on the battlefield, he ordered 187,000 inactive soldiers to serve as extras in the epic color film *Kolberg*. He was keen to support this picture, for it showed German civilians rising up against the invading Napoleonic army, and he wanted audiences to do the same thing against the current enemy. According to the director, he was actually “convinced that such a film was more useful than a military victory.”<sup>96</sup>

Hitler’s film theory did not always benefit the German war effort. Sometimes his decisions were those of a raving lunatic. At other times, and in another far-off place, his theory had a devastating impact.

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<sup>91</sup> Newsreel 510, June 10, 1940, NS 10, 49, 257; Newsreel 512, June 24, 1940, NS 10, 49, 182.

<sup>92</sup> Unnumbered newsreel, NS 10, 49, 278-282.

<sup>93</sup> Unnumbered newsreel, NS 10, 49, 228.

<sup>94</sup> Unnumbered newsreel, NS 10, August 11, 1940, 146.

<sup>95</sup> Unnumbered newsreel, NS 10, 49, 307-311.

<sup>96</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 713; Veit Harlan, *Im Schatten meiner Filme. Selbstbiographie*, S. Mohn, Gütersloh, 1966, 184, 187-188; *Kolberg*, dir. Harlan, UFA, 1945.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Enter Hollywood

The previous chapter, “Hitler’s Film Theory,” began with one of the best-known stories in modern history – Hitler’s biography – and dwelled on a detail that is not generally known – his obsession with movies. The remainder of the dissertation turns to something completely unknown – the business dealings and shared understandings between the German government and the American studios throughout the 1930s.

This chapter examines the origins of that relationship, focusing first on the German side of the story and then on the American. The German side relies not on Propaganda Ministry files (which were almost totally destroyed during the Second World War) but on reports that the German Foreign Office sent to the various German consulates and embassies about potentially damaging American movies. Since German consuls and ambassadors were recalled from the allied nations from 1939 onwards, their files were destroyed in Berlin during the Second World War, but the files of the consulates and embassies for nations not at war with Germany have survived. These files, which were preserved in countries including Spain, Italy, Hungary, Sweden, and Switzerland during the War, and which are held today at the Politisches Archiv of the Auswärtiges Amt (Foreign Office) in Berlin, reveal numerous instances of what the Germans called “collaboration” with the Hollywood studios.

The American side of the story, which relies on quite different sources, is divided into two sections: financial and ideological collaboration. The studios’ financial dealings with Germany are well covered in the reports of the American commercial attaché stationed in Berlin at the time, George Canty. Particularly revealing are the “weekly reports” that Canty sent to the United States Commerce Department for six months before and after Hitler took power. Canty’s reports are held by the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

Hollywood’s ideological collaboration with the Nazis has been harder to pin down, but it is the most devastating part of the whole story, and it is meticulously documented in the files of the Los Angeles Jewish Community Committee, held at the Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge. None of the above materials have been examined seriously by historians before.

In late November 1930, the renowned German director E.A. Dupont was working on a new picture in England. He had begun his career as a critic, and while he rarely wrote any more, he found that he could not hold back. Every night the streets of Piccadilly Circus were engulfed in chaos. Crowds were lining up to witness the event. Even the Duchess of York had put in an appearance. Dupont announced the news in a major Berlin paper under the headline, “ZEPPELIN ATTACK OVER LONDON.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.A. Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle’ – Zeppelin Angriff auf London,” *B.Z. am Mittag*, November 20, 1930. For recent discussions of Dupont’s work, see Jürgen Bretschneider, ed., *Ewald Andre Dupont: Autor und Regisseur*, edition text + kritik, Munich, 1992; Paul Matthew St. Pierre, *E.A. Dupont and His Contribution to British Film: Variete, Moulin Rouge, Piccadilly, Atlantic, Two Worlds, Cape Forlorn*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2010.

He was hearkening back to one of the most sensitive subjects of the World War. At the turn of the century Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin had successfully experimented with air travel, and one year into the War the Kaiser had approved the unrestricted bombing of London by German airships. The terrifying specter of these gigantic machines hovering over the city gave rise to fears of death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. In the first year London was completely exposed, but thanks to a network of searchlights, anti-aircraft guns, and observation posts, the number of casualties turned out to be much lower than expected. By the end of the War 557 people were killed as a result of the raids and several German airships were shot down. Still, the memory of the horror remained, and Dupont was saying that London was experiencing it all over again.<sup>2</sup>

He was not referring to an actual zeppelin attack, of course. He was referring to “the biggest movie ever made,” Howard Hughes’ *Hell’s Angels*. Just a few days earlier he had watched newsreel footage of a recent airship disaster, and now, as he watched this feature film, he admitted that he could not tell “where truth splits off from poetry.”<sup>3</sup>

Here is what he saw: a life-size zeppelin, whose circumference must have exceeded several kilometers, was moving slowly and ominously through concentrated cloud formations. The Germans onboard were preparing for an attack on Trafalgar Square. They ordered a young officer to get into the observation car and lowered him by cable through the clouds. Meanwhile British ground crew turned off all the lights in central London and shone blinding spotlights into the sky. The German captain laughed at their efforts, for the clouds provided adequate protection from the beams, and the observation car had a clear view of the city.<sup>4</sup>

That was when the trouble started. The boy in the car had been selected for his knowledge of the geography of London, but he had been acting strangely since the zeppelin’s departure. He loved England and he did not want to see it destroyed. As the captain shouted madly over the telephone, the boy looked at the target directly beneath him, then at London Bridge in the distance, and he made a fateful decision: he announced that they still needed to travel a little further. When they were directly over the Thames, the ship dropped all of its bombs, creating a fireworks display on the river.

The situation had taken a dramatic turn. Not only had the Germans failed in their mission, but four British planes had just appeared on the horizon. The captain knew that he needed to lighten the ship. He ordered his crew to drop the water ballast and to throw all equipment overboard, but still something was slowing them down. It was the observation car. At this point Dupont noticed a glitch in the film. The British censors had removed thirty minutes from the original print, including part of this scene.<sup>5</sup> In the United States, audiences had screamed as the captain took a massive pair of pliers and cut the wire between the car and the ship. In Britain, the censors took a pair of scissors and cut the film. They also removed images of dozens of German officers further lightening the load by jumping to their deaths, and they rearranged the climax so that instead of showing a British plane fly head-first into the belly of the zeppelin, it appeared to shoot

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Castle, *London 1914-17: The Zeppelin Menace*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2008, 1-16, 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle.’”

<sup>4</sup> *Hell’s Angels*, dir. Howard Hughes, United Artists, 1930; Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle.’”

<sup>5</sup> British Board of Film Classification on *Hell’s Angels*, October 23, 1930.

the zeppelin down. Only the incredible last image remained: “The blazing airship plummets, crashes, and burns with deafening noise, and is an inextricable ball of iron when it hits the ground.”<sup>6</sup>

Dupont was angry about the zeppelin scene in *Hell's Angels*, but not for the usual reasons. He was not one to see conspiracies against Germany wherever he looked. His own latest picture, *Two Worlds*, had just been targeted by German nationalists for criticizing an Austrian officer and portraying the beauty of a young Jewish girl. In describing *Hell's Angels* as “one of the most anti-German films ever made” he was making quite a different kind of argument, and because he was such a well-respected figure, his opinion was taken very seriously.<sup>7</sup>

The danger of *Hell's Angels*, Dupont said, was simply that it was so convincing. Audiences believed they were seeing the real thing. This was a problem because the German characters were in fact highly exaggerated. They laughed at the misfortunes of the English and they yelled whenever anything did not go their way. They acted like the illegitimate children of Erich von Stroheim, the figure most responsible for creating the stereotype of the German officer. This actor had launched his career in America during the World War by seizing on the need for anti-German propaganda. In pictures including *The Hun Within*, *The Unbeliever*, and *The Heart of Humanity* he became known as “the man you love to hate”: a ruthless Prussian who raped women, killed babies, and cursed in German.<sup>8</sup> His films involved an important limitation, however: they were silent. In *Hell's Angels*, finally, the von Stroheim character had come to life, and the result was horrible. How could Howard Hughes not have used a tiny fraction of his production costs to avoid this problem by bringing a German consultant over to Hollywood?<sup>9</sup>

Dupont's question could not have been further from Hughes' mind during the shooting of the picture. The twenty-two-year-old Texas millionaire had his own problems. He fired two directors before taking on the job himself; he broke the record for the greatest amount of film shot in a single movie (2.5 million feet); and he ended up spending a total of 3.8 million dollars, a figure comparable only to MGM's production costs on *Ben Hur*.<sup>10</sup> He was the laughing stock of Hollywood almost from day one. In December 1927 his entire set burned down, causing \$200,000 worth of damage. A censorship official who was present at the time reported the incident this way: “‘Hell’ certainly broke loose, but, although I observed carefully, I saw no angels present.”<sup>11</sup>

Hughes' difficulties continued when he left the studio. After hiring over 100 ground crew and amassing the largest private air force in the world – 87 vintage planes from the World War – he was unhappy with the filming location. At Mines Field in Inglewood, and then in the San Fernando Valley, there were no clouds to register the

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<sup>6</sup> Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle.’”

<sup>7</sup> Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle.’”

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Quinn Curtiss, *Von Stroheim*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 79-92; Richard Koszarski, *The Man You Loved to Hate: Erich von Stroheim and Hollywood*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Dupont, “Die deutschfeindlichen ‘Engel der Hölle.’”

<sup>10</sup> Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, *Empire: The Life, Legend and Madness of Howard Hughes*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1979, 67, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Jason S. Joy to Maurice McKenzie, December 13, 1927, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

movement of the aircraft.<sup>12</sup> He grounded the fleet at a cost of \$5,000 per day until he discovered that there were clouds in Oakland, and he moved the entire company there.<sup>13</sup>

After two years of work, Hughes thought he had finished his picture. Then he ran into another problem. In the time he had spent looking for clouds, he had failed to recognize that Hollywood had entered the sound era. *Hell's Angels* was virtually obsolete. If the picture were even to stand a chance of being profitable, he would need to turn it into a talkie. Obviously he could not afford to reshoot the aerial sequences, so he took his silent footage and overdubbed sound effects and dialogue. Since some of the actors had ad-libbed German during these scenes, he hired an interpreter to read their lips and guess what they had said. The rest of the film was unusable. Rather than reshoot it himself, Hughes gave the job to British director James Whale, who convinced him to hire Joseph Moncure March to rewrite the script. March watched the old version, found it "depressingly bad," and then came up with something acceptable. There was just one more change necessary. The female lead had originally been played by the Norwegian actress Greta Nissen, who spoke with a strong accent. Since the character was meant to be British, Hughes needed to find someone else. After a long search he settled on the unknown eighteen-year-old Jean Harlow. Even then there was a problem. March had written her character as "a beautiful upper-class slut with a talent for fornication," but Whale was having trouble getting a good performance out of her. He lost his temper with her a few too many times, and one day she broke down. "Tell me, tell me," she begged, "exactly how do you want me to do it?"<sup>14</sup>

"My dear girl," Whale replied, "I can tell you how to be an actress, but I cannot tell you how to be a woman."<sup>15</sup>

In fact Whale had underestimated Harlow's talent. She was a fast learner, and with her platinum blonde hair and dislike for underwear she would go on to become a sex symbol for a generation. Her performance in *Hell's Angels* would make her career. Yet even in this respect Hughes encountered difficulties, for everyone in the MPPDA found her behavior disgraceful. Foreign Manager Frederick Herron was particularly appalled by her "abbreviated" evening dress: "She wears nothing above the waistline on her back except for a couple of straps. In the front there is practically nothing. No decent woman would dare appear any place in the world in such a gown." He also complained about the way she conducted herself: "For at least ten or fifteen minutes, this girl and man are seen to chew each other's faces and necks. I can't recall any picture, even in the worst of the old days, ever showing such prolonged footage of any such objectionable sequence."<sup>16</sup> Since the Production Code was not yet being actively enforced, the MPPDA did not adopt an official stance on the picture. Nevertheless, individual censorship boards across the country could raise whatever objections they liked.

On May 27, 1930, three years after production began, *Hell's Angels* premiered at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "the biggest crowd ever" turned out on the streets, and a dramatic air show took place above their heads. Inside the theater "the most notable audience that has probably been gathered

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<sup>12</sup> Barlett and Steele, *Empire*, 62-63.

<sup>13</sup> James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Curtis, *James Whale*, 85-89.

<sup>15</sup> Curtis, *James Whale*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Herron to Hays, August 19, 1930, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

together for any first evening” watched the air show on the screen.<sup>17</sup> Hughes sat in the last row with his secretary and dictated possible cuts.<sup>18</sup> The MPPDA also made some suggestions, which he accepted, but when he attempted to distribute the picture, the censorship boards in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Massachusetts gave him problems. After much back and forth, Hughes and the MPPDA managed to have *Hell's Angels* accepted in the troublesome states.<sup>19</sup> It performed extremely well at the box office and foreign distribution seemed to be the next step. But here was where Dupont's critique came in. Hughes had not consulted with any German authorities in making this gigantic picture. Even Herron had guessed that there would only be “slight objection” from Germany. Both men had miscalculated badly.<sup>20</sup>

Dupont's critique of *Hell's Angels* turned out to be more than a mere film review. It was like throwing fire on an already precarious diplomatic situation. The employees of the German embassy in London had seen the picture when it first came out and they had been sending reports about it to their superiors in Berlin for five weeks. There were rumors that the German Foreign Office was about to lodge an official complaint with the British government.<sup>21</sup> The situation came to a climax exactly when Dupont's critique appeared. A British politician had been struck by a scene in *Hell's Angels* in which the leader of the opposition asked Prime Minister Asquith whether there was any news about the growing tensions with Germany.

“Our ambassador at Berlin received his passport at seven o'clock last evening,” Asquith had replied in the film, “and since eleven o'clock last night a state of war has existed between Germany and ourselves.”

This British politician thought it would be amusing to imitate the film in real life. He stood up in Parliament and asked about the growing tensions around *Hell's Angels*. Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson answered that no protest against the exhibition of the American film had been received from the German government.<sup>22</sup>

Various commentators speculated on the reasons for Foreign Office's retreat. There were suggestions that German intervention probably would not have succeeded anyway and would only have resulted in more publicity for Howard Hughes.<sup>23</sup> The German government seemed prepared to leave it at that and for a moment the drama around the film appeared to be over. But three weeks later the Nazis rioted against *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

In the first few months after the Nazis' actions, no one in Germany said much about *Hell's Angels*. Then, in August 1931, there were reports that the picture had been

<sup>17</sup> Edwin Schallert, “Great Thrills in Air Feature,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1930.

<sup>18</sup> “Hell's Angels,” *Variety*, June 4, 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Hughes to Hays, January 12, 1931, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

<sup>20</sup> Herron to Hays, August 19, 1930, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

<sup>21</sup> “Hetzfilme gegen Deutschland: Die Märchen von deutschen Kriegsgruelen erreichen Rekordkassen am Broadway,” *Der Film*, October 18, 1930; “Intervention in London? Lebhafter Telegrammwechsel des Auswärtigen Amts mit London wegen ‘Engel der Hölle,’” *Der Film*, November 22, 1930; “No Reich Protest on Film: London Embassy Denies Diplomatic Action on ‘Hell's Angels,’” *New York Times*, November 21, 1930; “‘Hell's Angels’ – Why Germany Objects to the Film,” *The Observer*, November 23, 1930; “‘Anti-German War Film – Diplomatic Protest Likely,’” *Guardian*, November 21, 1930; “‘Hell's Angels’ – German Official Protest,” *The Times*, November 21, 1930.

<sup>22</sup> “No Protest on War Film: Britain Says Germany Did Not Ask ‘Hell's Angels’ Be Barred,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1930.

<sup>23</sup> “‘Engel der Hölle.’ Ein antideutscher Kriegsfilm in London,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, November 21, 1930.

approved in Czechoslovakia. The news precipitated much debate. Some reviewers made the usual arguments about the harming of the German image.<sup>24</sup> Others pointed out that most of the people complaining about the movie had not actually seen it.<sup>25</sup> One journalist actually travelled to Prague to attend the Czech premiere and came back with a completely different interpretation from Dupont. He admitted that the German characters sometimes seemed brutal, but he added that the English did not come off so well either. *Hell's Angels* could not possibly be termed a hate film because it shifted its sympathies back and forth between both sides.<sup>26</sup>

The debate was nowhere near as dramatic as the one around *All Quiet on the Western Front*, though. There were two reasons for this, and the first had to do with actual differences between the films. Whereas many people had passionately defended the pacifism of *All Quiet*, there simply was not much to defend in *Hell's Angels*. An employee of the MPPDA put the problem this way: "The story of *Hell's Angels* is stupid, rotten, sordid, and cheap. It is like putting rundown, muddy shoes on a well-dressed woman. The whole idea is wrong, -- the girl is a plain little tart, the boys are a prig and a coward respectively, their conduct is out of the gutter."<sup>27</sup> It may not have been the most generous summary, but it was accurate and it went to the heart of the matter. *All Quiet on the Western Front* showed the horror of war with images of death and destruction that were hard to watch.<sup>28</sup> The images of death and destruction in *Hell's Angels*, on the other hand, were as exciting as the sex scenes. The questionable plot existed merely to give Howard Hughes an opportunity to thrill his audience. Hughes was not trying to harm the German image for the simple reason that he was not trying to say anything at all.

The German government did not see it that way, however. As soon as word came out that *Hell's Angels* was being screened in Prague, the Foreign Office registered a complaint with the Czech government. The complaint was rejected, and newspapers throughout Czechoslovakia loudly condemned the Foreign Office for exceeding its authority.<sup>29</sup> But an important change had taken place. Without any prompting from the National Socialists – there had not been a single mention of *Hell's Angels* in any of the Party papers – the Foreign Office had attempted to prevent the screening of a so-called hate film abroad. As the centrist *Berliner Tageblatt* observed, the situation was reminiscent of the embarrassing protests around *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with one difference – this time the Foreign Office was doing the Nazis' work for them.<sup>30</sup>

A few weeks later the situation took a final, dramatic turn. Carl Laemmle had just concluded his negotiations with the Foreign Office, and in return for having *All Quiet on the Western Front* permitted in Germany, he ordered the offices of Universal Pictures around the world to make cuts to their copies of the film. The Foreign Office was energized by this diplomatic success. Then a new problem emerged. *Hell's Angels* started

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<sup>24</sup> "‘Hell's Angels’ läuft an," *Licht Bild Bühne*, August 21, 1931.

<sup>25</sup> "‘Hell's Angels’ abgelaufen," *Licht Bild Bühne*, August 22, 1931.

<sup>26</sup> "Prag zieht 'Hell's Angels.' Prager Korrespondent sagt: Nicht deutschfeindlich!" *Film-Kurier*, 21 August 1931.

<sup>27</sup> L. Trotti to Hays, September 13, 1930, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

<sup>28</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front*, dir. Lewis Milestone, Universal Pictures, 1930.

<sup>29</sup> "Protests American Film – But German Legation Fails to Obtain Ban by Czechoslovakia," *New York Times*, September 6, 1931.

<sup>30</sup> "Hetzfilm in Prag. Deutscher Protest bisher erfolglos," *Berliner Tageblatt*, August 20, 1931.

playing simultaneously at twenty cinemas throughout Paris and was doing terrific business.<sup>31</sup> The Foreign Office decided to make its boldest move yet.

In the last weekend of September 1931, the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval and Foreign Minister Aristide Briand made an official trip to meet with Chancellor Heinrich Brüning in Berlin. It was the first visit of its kind ever paid by two French ministers to the German capital. The citizens of both nations flocked to show their support for this momentous attempt at peace. Ten thousand people packed into the Gare du Nord screaming “Vive la paix! Vive Laval! Vive Briand!” when the ministers departed.<sup>32</sup> When they arrived at the Friedrichstrasse station in Berlin, thousands more were shouting “No more wars!” “Hurrah for Briand, Laval, and Brüning!”<sup>33</sup> After the talks, the leaders pledged to cooperate in finance, industry, commerce, and shipping as a precursor to the permanent improvement of relations between the two countries.<sup>34</sup> Laval and Briand then returned to Paris and were cheered and acclaimed at every stopping point along the way.<sup>35</sup>

The trip was a tremendous success, apart from one detail. The German Foreign Office took advantage of the meeting to object to the screening of *Hell's Angels* in France. Frederick Herron of the MPPDA could hardly believe it.

This was brought to the attention of Laval recently on his trip to Berlin, he being there three days supposedly to settle problems of a most important nature concerning the welfare of Germany and the world at large, and the German Foreign Office was small enough to inject this into the discussion and exact a promise from Laval that he would withdraw the permit for “HELL'S ANGELS” upon his return to Paris. It is in my estimation one of the smallest and most absurd deals I have ever heard of. The French Foreign Minister gave his word on this matter, and of course, he was placed in a position where he could do little else. It is like a man visiting in a household and his host asking him to go home and fire the cook.<sup>36</sup>

*Hell's Angels* was immediately taken off the screen in Paris. The distributor of the picture, United Artists, responded by contacting the German Foreign Office and offering to cut anything objectionable. The Foreign Office refused and said that the whole picture had to be withdrawn. Herron was furious at this uncompromising attitude. “The Germans would do this sort of thing when the world is in a chaotic condition and really needs peace and not war,” he wrote. “It is a rotten piece of business when Germany can tell France how she is to run her country.”<sup>37</sup>

Once again, the National Socialists had played no part in the whole affair. In fact they had been extremely well behaved throughout the French Ministers' visit. Hitler told his followers that they would be expelled from the Party if they provoked any

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<sup>31</sup> “Engel der Hölle in 20 Pariser Kinos,” *Licht Bild Bühne*, September 21, 1931.

<sup>32</sup> “Paris Throngs Cheer for Peace as Laval Departs for Berlin,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1931.

<sup>33</sup> “Huge Crowds Hail Laval and Briand on Visit to Berlin,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1931.

<sup>34</sup> “France and Germany Unite in Trade Cooperation Plan,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1931.

<sup>35</sup> “Laval and Briand Return in Triumph,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1931.

<sup>36</sup> Herron to Joy, November 17, 1931, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

<sup>37</sup> Herron to Joy, November 17, 1931, PCA File on *Hell's Angels*.

demonstration against Laval and Briand. “Take no notice of them,” he commanded.<sup>38</sup> Without any prompting from the Nazi Party, the Foreign Office had instigated yet another protest against *Hell’s Angels* – only this time it had succeeded.

The development set a bad precedent for the film. Up to this point there had been just a few scandals around *Hell’s Angels*. In Istanbul, a German baron (no relation to the one in the movie) had bullied a theater owner, taken hold of his copy of the print, and “along with many other men carried out the censorship.”<sup>39</sup> In Peru, the President had removed several passages that he felt were too “defeatist.”<sup>40</sup> In Italy, the German ambassador was frustrated when he learned that a short letter to Mussolini would have resulted in the cancellation of the picture.<sup>41</sup> These were minor issues compared to what happened next. The Foreign Office instructed all German consulates and embassies to lodge protests against the film. Bans quickly followed in Spain, Holland, and China. In many other countries the prints were cut almost beyond recognition.<sup>42</sup> Since the MPPDA had approved *Hell’s Angels* in the first place, it was the authority responsible for seeking the overturning of as many of these decisions as possible. Herron was in charge, and he decided “to raise a stink... to be heard around the world.”<sup>43</sup> For the most part he succeeded. After six months he managed to overturn the bans in every country except Spain. This was war, and he was winning.<sup>44</sup>

It was around this time that the representatives of the German Foreign Office realized that they needed to adopt a different approach. They had gone to the highest authority in France and the Americans had responded by bringing out their own big guns. In contrast to the peaceful resolution of the *All Quiet* case, this one had blown up in their faces. Furthermore the American studios were announcing the production of several new films that might turn out to harm the German image. Rather than wait until the last minute, as they had done in the previous two cases, the Foreign Office decided to send someone to the United States to investigate the situation more closely.<sup>45</sup>

Other countries had organized similar missions in the late 1920s. Mexico, Canada, China, and Chile had all sent government representatives to Hollywood to ensure that their cultures were portrayed accurately. The best known case was Baron Valentin Mandelstamm of France, who charged the studios for his recommendations and threatened to involve his government if they did not pay.<sup>46</sup> The episode was fresh in everyone’s minds, so no one was very excited when the new visitor from Germany

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<sup>38</sup> Guido Enderis, “Germany to Guard Laval and Briand: Crack Military Police and Pick of Plain-Clothes Men to Assure Safety in Berlin,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1931; P.J. Philip, “German Welcome Impresses French,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1931.

<sup>39</sup> “Geschichten aus aller Welt Nr.17, 4,” Rome 835a, Politische Propaganda, volume 2, Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin.

<sup>40</sup> Abschrift VI C 6868, Deutsche Gesandtschaft, Lima, den 26 November 1932, Paris 2281, Filmwesen, volume 4, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>41</sup> Rom, den 18 Februar 1932, Rome 835a, Politische Propaganda, volume 2, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>42</sup> “Telegramm vom 20. Nr. 54,” February 26, 1932; “Telegramm Nr. 62,” February 27, 1932, Rome 835a, Politische Propaganda, volume 2; “Spanien verbietet Hetzfilme,” *Licht Bild Bühne*, November 26, 1931.

<sup>43</sup> Herron to Joy, November 17, 1931, PCA File on *Hell’s Angels*.

<sup>44</sup> Herron to Joy, June 7, 1932, PCA File on *Hell’s Angels*.

<sup>45</sup> “Kampf gegen Hetzfilme. Die Mission des Gesandtschaftsrats Freudenthal,” *Licht Bild Bühne*, May 25, 1932.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1997, 80-84.



arrived. But this man, who went by the name Freudenthal, was different from the others. He was the most enthusiastic representative the studios had ever seen. Throughout 1932 he traveled back and forth between New York and Los Angeles, the economic and production capitals of the film industry, and rather than complain about the massive distances involved, he engaged with passengers about various issues “for example the church, American women, etc.” so he could learn more about Americans. Among the people he encountered were Albert Milbank, Jane Adams, and the governor of Wisconsin, Philip La Follette. From his interactions he noticed something distinctive about Americans: they did not respond well to excessive formality. It simply made them put up their guard. He decided that when he arrived in Hollywood, he would not portray himself as an official government representative. Instead he would intentionally carry out all conversations in a casual, informal, free-and-easy manner.<sup>47</sup>

Freudenthal wrote a highly revealing thirty-page report on his year in America which he submitted to the German government just a few months after Hitler came to power. He began by describing the various obstacles he encountered. First, the film industry in the United States was in a tumultuous state. The waves were rising higher than his eyes could see. Given the complicated relationship that film bore to art, to economics, to technology, and – “last not least” – to politics, it was no simple object of study. To make matters worse, his own mission was extremely precarious. The unfortunate Baron Mandelstamm had merely protested films still in production, not films that had already been completed. By contrast, he was concerned with both types, so he was asking a lot from the Americans, and he had nothing to offer in return.<sup>48</sup>

By far the greatest obstacle he encountered was the MPPDA. The employees of the organization saw themselves as the field guards of the industry and they got jealous whenever he interacted directly with the studios. Early on he had met with actual studio officials (“the biggest men in the industry”) and he had found them all to be highly accommodating. The foreign manager of Fox, Clayton Sheehan, had even offered him a job as a special advisor in the company’s production department. Very quickly, however, the MPPDA started to intervene, and the two parties decided to strike a “gentleman’s agreement.” The MPPDA promised to consult Freudenthal in all cases involving Germany as long as he promised not to deal with the studios directly. By working with the film organization, Freudenthal apparently succeeded in canceling a Paramount picture about the German bombing of the *Lusitania* during the World War. Later on he brought about significant cuts to *Surrender*, a Fox film set in a German prison camp.<sup>49</sup>

That was not all that Freudenthal achieved. When he first arrived in New York, he had met with Carl Laemmle about Universal Pictures’ intended production of *The Road Back*, the sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In an exception to the gentlemen’s agreement, Freudenthal was permitted to continue his direct interactions with this one studio, and the results were dramatic. Laemmle agreed to postpone *The Road Back*, and his son Carl Laemmle Junior actively sought Freudenthal’s opinion many times, changing a whole range of pictures in Germany’s favor. When Freudenthal left Hollywood, Universal continued to seek the opinion of the local consul general. “Naturally,” Freudenthal explained, “Universal’s interest in collaboration [*Zusammenarbeit*] is not

<sup>47</sup> G.R.Dr.Freudenthal, “Aufzeichnung,” Paris 2282, Filmwesen, volume 5, 4-5, 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> Freudenthal, “Aufzeichnung,” 1, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Freudenthal, “Aufzeichnung,” 3-4, 6, 7, 5.

platonic but arises from the company's interest in its Berlin branch and in the German market."<sup>50</sup>

Since the gentlemen's agreement applied only in Los Angeles, Freudenthal spoke directly with the other studios when he was back in New York. RKO promised that whenever it made a film involving Germany it would work "in close collaboration" with the local consul. Fox said it would consult a German representative in the future as well. Even United Artists offered "the closest collaboration [*engste Zusammenarbeit*]" in return for some understanding in the *Hell's Angels* case. "Every time that this collaboration was achieved," Freudenthal said, "the parties involved found it to be both helpful and pleasant."<sup>51</sup>

Just before leaving the United States, Freudenthal met with Will Hays, the head of the MPPDA, and tried to convince him of the need for a permanent representative to be stationed in Hollywood. Hays' main worry was that if he appointed someone for Germany, he would need to do the same for all other countries. Freudenthal replied that Germany was a special case: the nation's reputation had been systematically destroyed by the movies of the post-War years, and the studios needed to be "good sports" and fix the problem. Hays must have been impressed with Freudenthal's free-and-easy manner, for he answered that he had never trusted Baron Mandelstamm, but perhaps things would work out this time.<sup>52</sup>

That, at least, was Freudenthal's version of the story. But a few sources suggest that he may not have been telling the complete truth. In March 1932, just before traveling to Los Angeles, Freudenthal tried to convince Herron to make some changes to an RKO feature called *The Lost Squadron*. In the end he was successful, but by pure chance Herron left behind some records that cast the interventions of the German representative in a different light.<sup>53</sup>

*The Lost Squadron* was an interesting case even before Freudenthal got involved. The film was based on a novel by Dick Grace, a famous stunt pilot who had worked on several movies including *Wings*, Hollywood's first major aviation feature. *Wings* was produced by Paramount in close cooperation with the United States Army, and Grace was proud to have been involved. He had different feelings about *Hell's Angels*. Hughes had made that picture independently, and he had pushed his pilots to the limit. On one occasion he offered Grace \$250 to perform an extremely dangerous stunt involving the shooting down of a German Gotha bomber, and Grace had refused, saying he wanted \$10,000. Hughes ultimately paid another stunt man \$1,000 for the job, and the terrible fate of the plane was visible in the final cut of the film.<sup>54</sup>

The following year, Grace published his novel *The Lost Squadron* about a tyrannical movie producer, de Forst, who made aviation pictures independently in Hollywood. At the opening of the novel, de Forst was working on a new feature called *Hell's Free Acre*. At the end, he put acid on the wires of a plane so that it would crash and give him the footage he needed.<sup>55</sup> Dick Grace had good contacts in Hollywood, and

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<sup>50</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 7-9.

<sup>51</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 9, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 10-11.

<sup>53</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Wings*, dir. William A. Wellman, Paramount, 1927; Tony Thomas, *Howard Hughes in Hollywood*, Citadel Press, Secaucus, 1985, 42-43; Barlett and Steele, *Empire*, 64-66.

<sup>55</sup> Dick Grace, *The Lost Squadron*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1931, 15.

he managed to sell his idea to David O. Selznick, who turned *The Lost Squadron* into a feature for RKO. The movie was faithful to the book apart from a few details. Selznick added a scene in which *Hell's Free Acre* – or as it was now called, *Sky Heroes* – opened dramatically at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. He also changed the villain's name from "de Forst" to "von Furst," and he hired none other than Erich von Stroheim to play the part.<sup>56</sup>

And so by sheer coincidence, the movie that was meant to be attacking *Hell's Angels* ended up invoking its most damaging stereotype. The villain of the film, who was obviously meant to represent Howard Hughes, was now a German. In Freudenthal's view, the depiction was even worse than the one in *Hell's Angels* because von Stroheim himself was involved, and now his voice was audible. Although *The Lost Squadron* was not a hate film in the conventional sense – it was not degrading the German army – Freudenthal felt that any German who watched it would be deeply offended by von Stroheim's dialogue. Freudenthal was following Dupont's lead and saying that this deliberate distortion of the German language was the most damaging mockery of all.<sup>57</sup>

The American authorities did not speak German, however, so they could not understand this critique. Herron was particularly resistant. He had been meeting with Freudenthal for weeks in New York, and after numerous discussions about *The Lost Squadron* he refused to cut the dialogue. Instead he asked Freudenthal to write to him about his problems with the film. "I knew I had him when I said put it in writing," he noted, "the Germans will never do this." After saying goodbye to Freudenthal and wishing him a pleasant journey to the West Coast, he thought it would be a good idea to warn the Los Angeles office of the MPPDA about the new visitor: "You will probably get frightfully fed up with this man, because he comes to stay ten minutes and stays two hours, but I don't see any way of getting around him as he is attached to the Embassy as a direct representative of the Ambassador."<sup>58</sup>

Herron thought the matter was over but he was wrong. A few weeks later the New York vice consul, Dr. Jordan, came to thank him for agreeing to cut the German dialogue in *The Lost Squadron*. Herron was confused, so Dr. Jordan gave him proof: "He had a cable from the Foreign Office in Berlin saying that our new sob sister 'Freudenthal' had made a report on this, saying that he suggested that we cut all the German language in the picture, and that I said I would do what I could." Herron looked at the cable in disbelief and – for not the first time – lost his temper. He told Dr. Jordan that the Foreign Office "had a hell of a nerve" asking for anything after the treatment it had given the American studios. Dr. Jordan replied that if Herron would just promise to cut the German dialogue, then the Foreign Office would not protest the picture in the rest of the world, but Herron was defiant: "I said I could not carry out my part of that sort of an agreement, that we had licked him in numerous places of the world and we were ready to take up this question whenever it came up and fight it out."<sup>59</sup>

Just when Herron thought the situation could get no worse, it did. He heard from his representatives in Los Angeles that Freudenthal had "very definitely" broached the

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<sup>56</sup> *The Lost Squadron*, dir. George Archainbaud, RKO, 1932.

<sup>57</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 5, 13; "Diplomatische Schritte wegen 'Verlorener Schwadron,'" *Licht Bild Bühne*, April 4, 1932.

<sup>58</sup> Herron to Joy, March 21, 1932, PCA File on *The Lost Squadron*.

<sup>59</sup> Herron to Wilson, April 16, 1932, PCA File on *The Lost Squadron*.

true aim of his mission. He was hoping to function as a permanent film liaison officer between the movie studios and his government, much as Baron Mandelstamm had done for France. Herron advised the Los Angeles office on how to respond: they should tell Freudenthal that he could have the job only if his government provided him with a written contract stating that he was the final authority on such matters. Herron knew that the German Foreign Office would never do this. He ended his letter to the Los Angeles office with a personal message to his ambitious visitor: "Don't hesitate to tell Freudenthal for me, that I am much disappointed in him, and until he changes his tactics he will get no cooperation here."<sup>60</sup>

The disparity between Herron's and Freudenthal's versions of the story is striking, and it is hard to know who to believe. On the one hand, Freudenthal was probably exaggerating his successes to convince the German government to make him their official representative.<sup>61</sup> On the other, he was more successful than Herron let on: he ended up convincing Will Hays to cut the offensive German dialogue in *The Lost Squadron*, and he did cultivate some good contacts with individual studios.<sup>62</sup> Far more important than Freudenthal's actual performance, however, was the approach that he was trying to cultivate. The German government was at war with the American studios as a result of the *Hell's Angels* case, and Freudenthal was pushing for collaboration instead. Herron had responded with an emphatic "no." But Herron's word was not final.

At around the time that Freudenthal was halfway through his trip, his government added a final element to the equation. As Freudenthal noted several times in his report, there was just one reason why the studio representatives had agreed to meet with him in the first place. "The American companies' attitudes to my mission varied according to their immediate interest in the German market," he said.<sup>63</sup> In numerous cases the companies offered to make changes to their hate films if Germany would agree to purchase more of their product in return. Freudenthal always responded to such offers with the excuse that "questions of political honor should never be connected to questions of economics."<sup>64</sup> Little did he know that his own government was about to respond to the Hollywood studios in precisely these terms.

On June 30, 1932, the ministry of the interior published a new set of regulations governing the screening of foreign films in Germany. One short section read as follows: "The allocation of permits may be refused for films, the producers of which, in spite of warnings issued by the competent German authorities, continue to distribute on the world market films, the tendency or effect of which is detrimental to German prestige."<sup>65</sup> In other words, if any foreign studio distributed a hate film anywhere around the world, then *all* of its product would subsequently be banned in Germany. The guardians of what would come to be known simply as "section fifteen" were the various German consulates and embassies. If they noticed that an offensive picture was playing in their respective district, they were to inform the Foreign Office immediately. The German government would then issue a warning to the relevant studio, and if the picture were not pulled from

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<sup>60</sup> Wilson to Herron, April 27, 1932; Herron to Wilson, April 29, 1932, PCA File on *The Lost Squadron*.

<sup>61</sup> Herron to Wilson, April 29, 1932, PCA File on *The Lost Squadron*.

<sup>62</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, Rundschreiben, May 31, 1932, Paris 2281, Filme, volume 3.

<sup>63</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 6.

<sup>64</sup> Freudenthal, "Aufzeichnung," 9.

<sup>65</sup> Reichsministerialblatt, 1932, 371.

circulation or cut dramatically, the studio would be banned from doing business in Germany.<sup>66</sup>

Freudenthal had mixed feelings about section fifteen. He understood that it might be necessary in certain cases, but he also knew that it could never be a replacement for active collaboration between the studios and the German government. On the one hand, section fifteen was likely to scare off only those studios doing significant business in Germany. On the other, he had noticed that most of the offense that the studios caused Germany was unintentional. *The Lost Squadron* was a perfect example. The Americans with whom he had watched the picture could not understand why he was drawing their attention to such “foolish material.”<sup>67</sup> He had to explain that any self-respecting German would be offended by the very way that von Stroheim was speaking.<sup>68</sup>

In Freudenthal’s opinion, therefore, a permanent representative needed to be stationed in Hollywood despite the advent of section fifteen. The representative should be officially connected to the Los Angeles consulate, and he should put the bulk of his energy into educating and training the American studios about German national feeling. “Prevention of disease is much better than treatment in a hospital,” Freudenthal wrote. “To avoid the use of section fifteen, friendly collaboration at the actual site of production is recommended.”<sup>69</sup>

But one thing was standing in the way of Freudenthal’s suggestion: *Hell’s Angels*. Under Herron’s lead, the Americans had managed to have the film permitted in most countries of the world, and the Germans were vowing revenge. The situation came to a climax in December 1932. By a bizarre turn of events, United Artists asked the Foreign Office for permission to use an ex-captain of a German zeppelin in a new blimp picture by Howard Hughes. The Foreign Office not only denied the request, but announced that section fifteen of the film regulations was being invoked against the company. “United Artists had the choice of complying with our demands or losing its business in Germany,” the Foreign Office announced, “and it chose the latter.”<sup>70</sup>

According to section fifteen, the German government needed to give United Artists a warning before taking action against the company. On December 10, that occurred in a dramatic meeting at the German consulate in New York. The official in charge of the proceedings was Dr. Jordan, the vice consul who had met with Herron about *The Lost Squadron* earlier in the year. The President of United Artists, Al Lichtman, was present along with his foreign manager, Arthur Kelly. Herron had also been invited to give his perspective.<sup>71</sup>

It was Kelly who did most of the talking. He explained that United Artists was completely blameless for the whole affair because the company only engaged in distribution. Furthermore, *Hell’s Angels* was hardly making a profit anyway. The picture had been so expensive to make that United Artists currently stood to lose one-and-a-half

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<sup>66</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, Rundschreiben, August 27, 1932, Lissabon 134/2, Filme.

<sup>67</sup> Herron to John V. Wilson, April 29, 1932, PCA file on *The Lost Squadron*.

<sup>68</sup> Freudenthal, “Aufzeichnung,” 12-13.

<sup>69</sup> Freudenthal, “Aufzeichnung,” 12, 14.

<sup>70</sup> G.R. Canty, “Weekly Report 23,” December 3, 1932, Record Group 151, Commerce Department, National Archives, College Park.

<sup>71</sup> “Warnungen wegen der Filme ‘Hell’s Angels’, ‘Casque de Cuir’ und ‘Mamba,’” December 10, 1932, Paris 2281, Filmwesen, volume 6.

million dollars. The German government was being unreasonable in demanding that the company withdraw the film from circulation or make cuts to foreign prints.<sup>72</sup>

At this point Dr. Jordan officially announced that the German government was invoking section fifteen of the film regulations against United Artists. President Lichtman responded by walking out of the meeting.<sup>73</sup>

Mr. Kelly kept talking. He said that the German government had never given United Artists the chance to receive and exchange suggestions about *Hell's Angels*, but had simply protested the film when it was already in circulation. This was very unfair, especially because United Artists had been so generous towards Germany. The company had recently distributed Ufa's picture *The Congress Dances* in the United States at a considerable loss. If anyone deserved to retaliate, it was United Artists.<sup>74</sup>

Dr. Jordan said nothing in response. He simply repeated his original warning. The German government was invoking section fifteen of the film regulations against United Artists. Mr. Kelly stiffened visibly. "This is of no importance to us, as we've got no business in Germany anyway," he declared. Dr. Jordan asked him what his company was planning on doing to avoid further conflict with the German government. Kelly mumbled something about asking Mr. Hughes to withdraw the picture, but he was obviously not being sincere. Dr. Jordan repeated the warning one more time "to leave no doubt about the government's intentions." Kelly responded that he had fully understood the meaning of the warning, and then he walked out too.<sup>75</sup>

Dr. Jordan and Herron remained. There was not much left to say. Herron indicated that he was in complete agreement with all of Kelly's arguments, and he was about to leave it at that when he had a change of heart. He looked at Dr. Jordan and urged him not to annoy United Artists too much. The company was extremely powerful, and could easily adopt dangerous retaliatory measures. For example the company could make an anti-German film with an all-star cast that would be much more damaging than anything Germany had ever imagined. The MPPDA would not have the power to "ban" such a major production. Herron undoubtedly derived some pleasure from injecting this warning of his own.<sup>76</sup>

It is uncertain whether United Artists were ever officially kicked out of the German market. Mr. Kelly engaged in more talks with the Foreign Office throughout January and February of 1933 but nothing came of them.<sup>77</sup> He was probably playing for time anyway – negotiating with the German authorities while *Hell's Angels* picked up its final proceeds abroad.<sup>78</sup> He did give a quick interview in Berlin in which he said that United Artists films were "too attached to the American mentality" to do worthwhile business in Germany.<sup>79</sup> If he really meant that, he changed his mind very quickly, for the

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<sup>72</sup> "Warnungen wegen der Filme 'Hell's Angels', 'Casque de Cuir' und 'Mamba,'" 2, 5.

<sup>73</sup> "Warnungen wegen der Filme 'Hell's Angels', 'Casque de Cuir' und 'Mamba,'" 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> "Warnungen wegen der Filme 'Hell's Angels', 'Casque de Cuir' und 'Mamba,'" 3.

<sup>75</sup> "Warnungen wegen der Filme 'Hell's Angels', 'Casque de Cuir' und 'Mamba,'" 3-4.

<sup>76</sup> "Warnungen wegen der Filme 'Hell's Angels', 'Casque de Cuir' und 'Mamba,'" 5-6.

<sup>77</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 29," January 14, 1933, 4-5; Canty, "Weekly Report 32," February 6, 1933, 2-6; Canty, "Weekly Report 33," February 11, 1933, 4; Canty, "Weekly Report 35," February 25, 1933, 7; Canty, "Weekly Report 36," March 3, 1933, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, VI C 1779, April 29, 1933, Paris 2282, Filmwesen, volume 5, 3.

<sup>79</sup> "Keine United-Artists-Filme in Deutschland. 'LBB' Interview mit A. W. Kelly," *Licht Bild Bühne*, September 20, 1933.

following year he submitted a whole series of pictures to the German censors.<sup>80</sup> Almost all were rejected instantly.<sup>81</sup> Germany may not have put an official ban on United Artists' product, but obviously the new government was no longer interested in doing business with the renegade company.

The other Hollywood studios paid attention to Germany's treatment of United Artists. They were not going to make the same mistake. In the end Herron's prediction to Dr. Jordan at the meeting on *Hell's Angels* only partly came true. United Artists did put out a major anti-German film, *The Great Dictator*, and the MPPDA did uphold its vow not to interfere with the production in any way. But seven years passed before that film appeared. In the meantime, Freudenthal's notion of collaboration accurately described the Hollywood studios' relationship with Germany.

The terms of this collaboration were relatively straightforward. The studios agreed to follow the advice of a German representative in Hollywood as long as they got something in return. Without hesitating, they issued one major demand: they wanted better conditions for the sale of their films in Germany.

Ever since the World War, the studios had experienced tremendous problems in the German market. Germany had first put a wartime embargo on foreign movies, and afterwards had regulated the footage of film that could be imported each year.<sup>82</sup> Then, on January 1, 1925, in an attempt to encourage local production, the government had introduced the notorious quota system: for every foreign film released in Germany, a German film had to be produced.<sup>83</sup> The American studios got around the law by making extremely cheap German pictures – “quota quickies” – many of which were so bad that they were never screened to the public. The sole purpose of these pictures was to allow the Americans to obtain import permits for their major productions.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately the solution proved to be a temporary one.

Over the following years, the Germans introduced increasingly harsh quota restrictions. In 1928 they started setting limits to the actual number of imported films, drastically reducing Hollywood's share of the market. In 1930 they allowed 210 films into the country, of which only 70 could contain sound. Four-sevenths of these films could be imported on “external licenses,” two-sevenths on “internal licenses,” and one-seventh through “governmental begging.”<sup>85</sup> The first category involved subsidizing German movies or buying shares in German movie companies, and the second required paying a set fee per film. The third category was self-explanatory. By the end of the year,

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<sup>80</sup> “United Artists Filme in Deutschland,” *Film-Kurier*, March 8, 1934; “UA Back into German Market After 4 Years,” *Variety*, March 20, 1934.

<sup>81</sup> Censorship Lists for United Artists Films *The Affairs of Cellini*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Roman Scandals*, *Scarface*, *Nana*, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>82</sup> Jens Ulff-Møller, *Hollywood's Film Wars with France: Film Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy*, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2001, 69-74.

<sup>83</sup> “‘One for One’, Say Germans: Commerce Dept. Holds Valuable Information,” *Variety*, November 19, 1924; Modris Eksteins, “War, Memory, and Politics: The Fate of the Film *All Quiet on the Western Front*,” *Central European History*, March 1980, 66-67.

<sup>84</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, “Rin-Tin-Tin in Berlin or American Cinema in Weimar,” *Film History*, 5, 1993, 49-62.

<sup>85</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 2,” July 9, 1932, 4-5.

the studios had for the first time sold fewer films to Germany than other foreign countries combined.<sup>86</sup>

The situation was becoming intolerable. Frederick Herron complained about Germany's "absurd, ridiculous, and unfair trade laws."<sup>87</sup> The American managers tried dealing with the German authorities directly, but they were "insulted, cajoled, and even ushered out of official offices."<sup>88</sup> In response to the growing difficulties, the United States Department of Commerce formed a separate motion picture division and sent a trade commissioner, George Canty, to Berlin.<sup>89</sup>

But the problems continued to mount. In 1931 the Germans imposed massive booking restrictions on foreign films. In 1932 they announced that dubbing had to be done locally.<sup>90</sup> All this was in addition to the complex system already in place. Although Canty was a shrewd businessman, even he sometimes had trouble understanding the details of each new addition to the quota regulations. "I am working on a brief ... to be submitted to the Bureau as soon as I can get it clear in my head," he once wrote to his superiors in Washington. "I am doing my best to hurry up ... before a too deep study of what is needed to protect the domestic industry may result in a characteristically German set of regulations too full of complications to permit our successful operation under them."<sup>91</sup>

The Nazis had promised to simplify the quota system if they came to power. In July 1932, a senior film official had proclaimed that the Nazi Party was "absolutely committed to international exchange and collaboration." Although the Party would not tolerate such atrocities as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Hell's Angels*, American movies would always be welcome in Germany. Ideally the quota would return to the original stipulation: one foreign film admitted for every German film produced. "But if it turns out that we haven't made enough films ourselves to sustain the local market," the Nazi spokesman added, "then we will unconditionally loosen the quota. We are not planning on sitting idly by while theater owners lose money just because Ufa is dictating our import policy!"<sup>92</sup>

Canty was not entirely convinced. When Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, he worried that "anything may happen."<sup>93</sup> When the newly formed Propaganda Ministry took charge of all film matters, he wrote that "there will be no accounting for their recommendations."<sup>94</sup> Very quickly he changed his mind. In early April he met with Goebbels' personal assistant, Dr. Mutzenbecher, who told him "that the Americans were needed along with the right kind of Germans to help the Party develop the film to its proper worth." This was just the opposite of the previous governments' policies, and Canty was delighted. "I placed myself on record in pledging the American interests to a cooperation which would restore the German market to its proper worth," he

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<sup>86</sup> Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz. Der amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, Trier, 1999, 21-26.

<sup>87</sup> Herron to Wilson, April 16, 1932, PCA File on *The Lost Squadron*.

<sup>88</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 30," January 21, 1933, 3.

<sup>89</sup> "Dept. of Com. Picture Dept.," *Variety*, December 17, 1924.

<sup>90</sup> Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 25-26.

<sup>91</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 35," February 25, 1933; Canty, "Weekly Report 46," May 13, 1933, 4.

<sup>92</sup> "Rassenfrage, Kontingent, Lizenzen. Das Raether-Interview in „The Era,“" *Der Film*, July 16, 1932.

<sup>93</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 34," February 18, 1933, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 39," March 25, 1933, 3.



reported. A few weeks later he had further “friendly contact” with Mutzenbecher and other prominent Nazis in the industry, and it was agreed “that a working arrangement with the American interests was absolutely necessary in order to break down film barriers abroad ... and that collaboration with our office was about the only way these matters could properly be discussed.”<sup>95</sup>

There was just one hitch in the negotiations. At the same time as the parties were making pledges to each other, Canty became aware of some “petty troubles” that threatened to disrupt his entire scheme.<sup>96</sup> He had feared that something of this sort might occur. Since early March there had been rumors that the Nazis were planning on ridding the film headquarters in Berlin of hundreds of Jewish employees. Not only the German studio workers but also the salesmen for the American companies were at risk.<sup>97</sup> Canty soon reported that “many of the German exchanges, particularly Ufa, are receiving notes from time to time to the effect that certain Jewish employees must be dispensed with.”<sup>98</sup> He was toning down the situation considerably. Actually in one hour on March 29, Ufa management discharged much of its greatest talent, forcing a massive number of German film artists to leave the country.<sup>99</sup> A large proportion moved to Hollywood.

The American companies were next. The trouble began when Hitler announced a boycott on Jewish businesses in Germany on April 1, leading Canty to suspect that the German public would stop watching American movies. He “took the bull by the horns” as he put it, and asked for permission to superimpose titles over American movies stating that they had been approved by the national government.<sup>100</sup> He need not have bothered. The people’s enthusiasm for boycotting Jewish businesses did not require them to miss out on seeing Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel* or Paul Muni in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, some of the more radical Party members had other ideas. In the wake of the boycott, the Nazi Salesmen’s Syndicate sent a letter to the American companies ordering them to discharge all Jewish salesmen. Although Canty assured the companies that the Syndicate had no official power, the letter threw the Jewish employees into a “mild panic,” and they immediately ceased their selling activities.<sup>102</sup> For several weeks they remained off the road, thoroughly demoralized and fearful, while Canty acted as a sort of “father confessor” for them. “The poor employees,” Canty said, “they have had all the spunk knocked out of them.”<sup>103</sup>

The employees were not only afraid of what would happen if they disobeyed the Salesmen’s Syndicate. They were also terrified of their own fellow workers. The American companies hired mostly German help, including many Nazi Party members, and very quickly Nazi labor organizations started forming within the individual companies. These organizations forbade the Jews to return to work, and a group in

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<sup>95</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 41,” April 8, 1933, 7-8; Canty, “Weekly Report 44,” April 29, 1933, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 41,” April 8, 1933, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 38,” March 18, 1933, 2.

<sup>98</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 40,” April 1, 1933, 3-4.

<sup>99</sup> Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996, 210-212.

<sup>100</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 40,” April 1, 1933, 5-6.

<sup>101</sup> Canty, “Economic and Trade Notes 235,” May 16, 1933, 1-2.

<sup>102</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 41,” April 8, 1933, 2-3.

<sup>103</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 42,” April 15, 1933, 2-3.

Paramount even threatened gentile employees who stood up for their friends. Canty was aware of the situation, and he felt sorry for the Jewish employees, but for him these were still petty matters.<sup>104</sup>

There was just one disturbing point from his perspective. The German Exhibitors' Association – the organization responsible for booking all film screenings – had resolved not to purchase films from Jews. Unlike the Nazi Salesmen's Syndicate, which was a minor organization, the Exhibitors' Association was a key player in the Americans' day-to-day operations and was capable of causing them considerable financial harm. "Looking at the situation broadly," Canty wrote, "I presume some readjustments will have to be made in our company personnel as time goes on, inasmuch as they are indelibly stamped as Jewish companies. But I don't mean by this that we are yet obliged to rid ourselves of all Jewish employees. I almost feel that we will eventuate by discharging the dispensable and keeping the indispensable, if there be nothing specific against any of these latter."<sup>105</sup>

Canty believed that the best strategy at this point was to remain calm and collected while the Exhibitors' Association worked out its official policy on the Jewish salesmen. Not everyone agreed. The managers of MGM and Warner Brothers in Berlin – Fritz Strengtholt and Phil Kauffman respectively – wanted to put the situation to the test. At a special meeting of the American companies doing business in Germany, Strengtholt and Kauffman urged the managers of Paramount, Fox, Universal, and Columbia to join them in sending their salesmen back on the road. Hesitantly, the managers agreed. Canty was suspicious. "I was not sufficiently successful," he wrote, "in determining whether or not the Metro and Warner Brothers managers were playing possum by trying to create a situation which, making them martyrs to the Jewish cause, could at once get them out of an uncomfortable Germany and a reasonable assurance from their chiefs for another important assignment."<sup>106</sup>

The following day, Strengtholt and Kauffman ordered their salesmen to resume their normal activities. The Nazis responded immediately. Adolf Engl, the head of the Exhibitors' Association, telegraphed all district leaders to be firm in their decision not to buy films from Jewish salesmen. Furthermore, the Propaganda Ministry "became peeved" and decided to punish the guilty managers, particularly Strengtholt of MGM. Strengtholt went running to Canty and begged him to intercede on his behalf, so Canty told his contacts at the Foreign Office that Strengtholt was a gentile. Without any further discussion, the MGM manager was permitted to continue working in Germany.<sup>107</sup>

The other managers were not so lucky. Early the next morning, Max Friedland – local manager of Universal Pictures and favorite nephew of Carl Laemmle – was pulled out of bed in his native city of Laupheim and hustled off to prison. He remained there for five hours without being told the charge.<sup>108</sup> Phil Kauffman, manager of Warner Brothers, received even worse treatment. His car was stolen, he was beaten, and as one newspaper stated "the Nazis later apologized to him, explaining it was only a mistake. They thought

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<sup>104</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 41," April 8, 1933, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 41," April 8, 1933, 3-4.

<sup>106</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 43," April 22, 1933, 2-3.

<sup>107</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 43," April 22, 1933, 3-4.

<sup>108</sup> Canty, "Weekly Report 43," April 22, 1933, 4-5.

he was two other fellows.”<sup>109</sup> Eventually, the Jewish managers of all the major studios succeeded in escaping the country, with one slight exception. The manager of Fox left for Paris after being told that “something would happen to him,” only to be escorted back by his supervisor, Clayton Sheehan, to face things out.<sup>110</sup> A few weeks later he was replaced by a non-Jew, and he managed to find a new position abroad where he could operate with more personal comfort.

The fate of the regular salesmen was another matter altogether. Unlike the managers, they could not be transferred to a foreign country at a moment’s notice. And unlike the actors, directors, and technical specialists from Ufa and the other German studios, their services were not needed in Hollywood. At the beginning of May, after the Jewish salesmen had been kept off the road for over a month, the studios announced their decision. “U.S. Film Units Yield to Nazis On Race Issue,” one newspaper reported. “American attitude on the matter is that American companies cannot afford to lose the German market at this time no matter what the inconvenience of personnel shifts.”<sup>111</sup>

Canty ended up doing just what he had predicted. He presented lists of the most desirable Jewish employees to his contacts at the Foreign Office, who managed to obtain some exemptions from the Propaganda Ministry. If anyone threatened these employees, the local police would provide protection.<sup>112</sup> The compromise lasted until January 1, 1936, when the Nazi government passed a law forbidding even these “lucky” Jews from working in the distribution business. Canty’s assistant at the time reported the change in government policy: “Director Kaelber of the General Association of Film Producers and Distributors said that, now that all non-Aryans have been eliminated from the German film industry, the next step for the members of the association should be toward the destruction of the Jewish spirit. However, no details about this plan were announced by him.”<sup>113</sup>

The purging of Jews from the branches of the American companies in Berlin was a necessary step for the continuation of business dealings between Hollywood and the Nazis. Canty was happy with the result. The first German quota under the new government contained fewer restrictions than usual, and remained in place for three years rather than one.<sup>114</sup> With domestic film production down as a result of the Germans’ own purging of Ufa, American movies could be expected to make up the difference in the theaters, so a very good season was on the way. “All in all,” Canty resumed, “we have very little to complain about.”<sup>115</sup>

But what Canty didn’t know was that the Americans’ decision was not purely an economic one; it had cultural ramifications as well. The companies had put their offices

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<sup>109</sup> “U.S. Filmers Protest Restrictions In Germany, but Carry on Trade,” *Variety*, April 25, 1933.

<sup>110</sup> “Nazis Oust U.S. Film Men: Yank Filmers Resist Edict,” *Variety*, April 18, 1933, 17.

<sup>111</sup> “U.S. Film Units Yield to Nazis On Race Issue,” *Variety*, May 9, 1933.

<sup>112</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 45,” May 6, 1933, 4; Canty, “Weekly Report 46,” May 13, 1933, 1; Canty, “Weekly Report 47,” May 20, 1933, 4-5.

<sup>113</sup> Douglas Miller, “Special Report 55: German Film Problems,” December 23, 1935, 1-2, Department of Commerce.

<sup>114</sup> Canty, Special Report 4: German Film Law Extended for Three Years with Slight Modifications,” August 1, 1933; Canty, “Special Report 112: Outlook for the 1934/35 Season for German Films,” June 26, 1934.

<sup>115</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report 45,” May 6, 1933, 4. For more details about Canty’s interactions, see Canty, “Weekly Report 46,” May 13, 1933, 4; Canty, “Weekly Report 49,” June 3, 1933, 3-6.

in order in compliance with the Nazis' requests, and in doing so they had adopted a stance that would permeate their own movies. The destruction of the Jewish spirit was about to take place in Hollywood.

"When I was young," wrote Ben Hecht, the most prolific screenwriter of the 1930s, "the stage was full of Jewish dialect comedians, of Jewish family plays... There were popular songs about Jews, sung in accent... The Jew was a comic, crazily human figure to be encountered everywhere – in song, fiction, and behind the footlights. His foibles were part of the American curriculum. His oddities and his accents were known to all."<sup>116</sup>

In this period the Jew was also a familiar figure on the screen. He appeared in approximately 230 movies from 1900 to 1929 – far more than any other ethnic type – and he assumed a whole variety of roles. He could be a pawnshop owner, a clothes merchant, or a sweatshop worker; he could be a historical or biblical character, or an impoverished resident of a ghetto. He could prance about laughing at other people's expense, or he could be the butt of everyone's jokes. He was not always likeable, and he was rarely more than one-dimensional, but without any doubt he was visible.<sup>117</sup>

The arrival of talking pictures landed him a major role. In *The Jazz Singer* (1927) he played Jakie Rabinowitz, the descendent of a long line of cantors who rebelled against his father and became a popular singer. Upon learning that his father was dying, he came home and sang Kol Nidre at the synagogue in his father's place, and then he returned to the stage. Every aspect of his behavior was a comment on the Jew's shift into the American spotlight.<sup>118</sup>

The following year, he made another, equally important appearance. Now he was Benjamin Disraeli, the British Prime Minister from 1874 to 1880 and founder of the modern Conservative Party. The people slurred his racial origins – one Hyde Park speaker criticized him as "an outsider and a Jew whose grandfather was a foreigner" – but he showed the foresight necessary to turn England into a great power.<sup>119</sup> The renowned British theater actor George Arliss won Best Actor for his performance in the leading role, and *Disraeli* narrowly lost the Best Picture category to *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>120</sup>

In the early 1930s, there were some less famous but more complicated depictions of Jews on the American screen. *The Yellow Ticket* (1931) showed the struggles of a Jewish woman against anti-Semitism in Russia. King Vidor's *Street Scene* (1931) revealed the day-to-day interactions of Jews with non-Jews in New York City. And William Wyler's *Counselor at Law* (1933) portrayed an attorney still encountering race prejudice despite his professional success.<sup>121</sup> Wyler had wanted to cast Paul Muni (real name: Muni Weisenfreund) in the lead role, but producer Samuel Goldwyn (real name:

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<sup>116</sup> Ben Hecht, *A Guide for the Bedevilled*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1944, 208.

<sup>117</sup> Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York, 3-53.

<sup>118</sup> *The Jazz Singer*, dir. Alan Crosland, Warner Brothers, 1927.

<sup>119</sup> *Disraeli*, dir. Alfred E. Green, Warner Brothers, 1929.

<sup>120</sup> Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew*, 12.

<sup>121</sup> *The Yellow Ticket*, dir. Raoul Walsh, Fox, 1931; *Street Scene*, dir. King Vidor, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1931; *Counselor at Law*, dir. William Wyler, Universal, 1933.

Goldfish) cautioned against it. “You can’t have a Jew playing a Jew,” he said. “It wouldn’t work on the screen.”<sup>122</sup>

The remark was revealing. Just five years earlier, the well-known Jewish performer Al Jolson had played Jackie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* to massive popular acclaim. But the world had changed: Adolf Hitler was Chancellor of Germany, the persecution of the Jews had begun, and the studios had experienced the results first-hand. Goldwyn’s warning was an early indication of the bigger drama to come.

In April 1933, at the same time as the Jewish salesmen were being taken off the road in Berlin, all was not well in Hollywood. The economic depression had forced many of the national banks to close their doors, and the studios had announced a temporary fifty-per-cent pay cut for all employees. At MGM, Louis B. Mayer said that he would enforce the cut only if his employees accepted it. He called a meeting, and Lionel Barrymore – one of his most highly-paid stars – urged everyone to take on the burden for the good of the company. A Hungarian screenwriter named Ernest Vajda responded that MGM was still making excellent money, and that perhaps it would be better to wait out the situation a little longer. Barrymore lost his temper. He pointed at Vajda and yelled, “Sir, you are acting like a man on his way to the guillotine who wants to stop for a manicure.” There was no further discussion. Barrymore’s position prevailed.<sup>123</sup>

At Warner Brothers the consequences of the cut were more far-reaching. The head of production – the young and talented Darryl F. Zanuck – was starting to realize that Jack and Harry Warner would never allow him to take over their studio. He needed to get out. When the brothers announced the pay cut, he saw his chance. He called a press conference and stated that he was personally restoring all salaries to their normal levels. Jack Warner was furious and overruled the decision immediately. On April 14, Zanuck announced that since he no longer enjoyed the confidence of his superiors, he was leaving Warner Brothers for good.<sup>124</sup>

Two days later he was having breakfast with the president of United Artists, Joseph Schenck. Schenck was waving a check in front of his eyes, signed by Louis B. Mayer, and made out for \$100,000. “We’re in business,” Schenck was saying. “We got it.” Schenck had convinced Mayer to fund a new production company in which Zanuck could enjoy a much greater degree of control. It was a big moment for the geography of Hollywood. Twentieth Century Pictures was born.<sup>125</sup>

Back at Warner Brothers, Zanuck had worked with some major stars who now wanted to follow him to his new studio. Constance Bennett and Loretta Young made the move when they noticed that their contracts with Warner Brothers had expired.<sup>126</sup> Then the great actor George Arliss did the same. “Although I had been very happy at Warner Brothers, I made my next contract with Zanuck,” he recalled. “This was an obvious step for me to take since my association had been entirely with him ever since I started in talking pictures.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Friedman, *Hollywood’s Image of the Jew*, 74.

<sup>123</sup> Leonard Mosley, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood’s Last Tycoon*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1984, 122-125.

<sup>124</sup> Mosley, *Zanuck*, 125-127.

<sup>125</sup> Mosley, *Zanuck*, 129-132.

<sup>126</sup> Mosley, *Zanuck*, 134.

<sup>127</sup> George Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1940, 222.

Arliss had an exciting new idea for a Twentieth Century production. Two years earlier, he had come across a play about the Rothschilds, the Jewish banking family of Europe, and he had convinced Warner Brothers to purchase the rights to the script. Given his massive success as Disraeli, he told Zanuck, perhaps he was now ready to play the part of Nathan Rothschild. Although Warner Brothers were extremely angry about Arliss's move to Twentieth Century – they had written a concerned letter to Will Hays claiming that Zanuck had lured Arliss away – they somehow agreed to sell the script for the same price that they had paid for it.<sup>128</sup>

Zanuck knew that he was on to a good thing. He needed a controversial picture to draw attention to his new company, and he had hit on just the right subject.<sup>129</sup> The Rothschilds' struggles for equal rights in the previous century held particular significance at just that moment given all that was happening in Germany. Zanuck could turn the picture into a timely statement on anti-Semitism. He could create a fictional character whose diatribes resembled those of Hitler. He could show images of violence in the ghettos. And he could have his own hero, Nathan Rothschild, speak out against the terror: "Go into the Jewish quarter of any town in Prussia today, and you'll see men lying dead... for but one crime – that they were Jews."<sup>130</sup>

Zanuck had considerable experience with this kind of material. He had personally supervised Hollywood's two most important productions about Jews, *The Jazz Singer* and *Disraeli*. In another fourteen years he would put out his next installment, *Gentlemen's Agreement*.<sup>131</sup> Now he was about to make his most important contribution of all. But there was something unusual about this authority on all Jewish matters, and it emerged in a letter Zanuck wrote in late 1933. A censorship official had suggested that Zanuck show the script of his new movie to a representative of the German government, and Zanuck had declined, stating that the Nazis disapproved of the Jewish origins of the Hollywood producers. Then he added, "It just so happens that I am of German-Swiss descent and not a Jew."<sup>132</sup>

Here lay the true significance of Zanuck's move from Warner Brothers to Twentieth Century. In the past, his movies about Jews had been supervised by Jews. Jack Warner spent every afternoon on the studio lot watching the unedited footage from the previous day and cutting whatever he disliked.<sup>133</sup> Harry Warner was even more concerned about Jewish matters than Jack. Of course *The Jazz Singer* and *Disraeli* contained objectionable elements – Jackie Rabinowitz put on blackface when he sang in nightclubs, and Benjamin Disraeli went behind the backs of British Parliament to

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<sup>128</sup> Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios*, 222-223; Tom Stempel, *Screenwriter: The Life and Times of Nunnally Johnson*, A.S. Barnes & Company, San Diego and New York, 47-48; Harry M. Warner to Will Hays, June 9, 1933, in Rudy Behmler, ed., *Inside Warner Bros.*, Viking, New York, 1985, 12-13; "Arliss and 'Rothschild,'" *New York Times*, April 22, 1934.

<sup>129</sup> *Recollections of Nunnally Johnson: Oral History Transcript*, interviewed by Tom Stempel, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 28.

<sup>130</sup> *The House of Rothschild*, dir. Alfred L. Werker, Twentieth Century Pictures, 1934.

<sup>131</sup> *Gentlemen's Agreement*, dir. Elia Kazan, Twentieth Century Fox, 1947.

<sup>132</sup> Daryl Zanuck to James Wingate, December 4, 1933, PCA File on *The House of Rothschild*.

<sup>133</sup> Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Crown Publishers, New York, 1988, 187-189.

purchase the Suez Canal – but neither of these pictures was capable of causing the Jewish community serious offense.<sup>134</sup>

At Twentieth Century Zanuck was in quite a different position. The president of the company, Joseph Schenck, actually seemed to think that Zanuck was Jewish (he often put his hand on Zanuck's shoulder and said, "We Jews should stick together").<sup>135</sup> He rarely involved himself in the production process, and on the one occasion that he did read an early version of the Rothschild script, he brought up the villain's anti-Semitic tirades. When Zanuck told him not to worry – the film would not be interpreted as a plea on behalf of the Jewish people – Schenck just laughed. "Oh no, not like that," he said. "I'm afraid people will cheer."<sup>136</sup> Even if Schenck had been seriously concerned with the script, he would hardly have been able to make changes anyway. He had gone into business with Zanuck as an equal, and the whole point of the arrangement was to allow Zanuck to make movies on his own.

And so the one Hollywood studio that was not run by a Jew – and that had not experienced persecution at the hands of the Nazis – turned out to be the one to broach the situation in Germany for the first time. Zanuck was about to extend Samuel Goldwyn's motto – "You can't have a Jew playing a Jew" – to the filmmaking process itself.

The original idea for *The House of Rothschild* had come from a Boston newspaperman named George Hembert Westley, who sent George Arliss a copy of the script knowing that the great actor had a reputation for taking on unknown material.<sup>137</sup> Now that Twentieth Century owned the rights, Arliss reread the script – a historical drama in which Nathan Rothschild funded the British army's campaign against Napoleon – and although he was still taken with the idea, he could see why Westley's work was unknown.<sup>138</sup> He asked his usual writer, Maude Howell, to work on a new script with screenwriter Sam Mintz.<sup>139</sup>

Arliss had a reputation not just for taking on unknown material but also for meddling with the writing process. And in this case he was particularly keen to inject his ideas, for he had just had a most unpleasant experience upon his summer vacation to England. He had been anxious to book his trip as quickly as possible, and the only space he could find was on a ship called the *Bremen*. A few weeks later he had been "genuinely surprised" when he received letters from his Jewish fans expressing their disappointment that he had patronized a German ship. "I confess that I felt rather guilty about this because the Jews have always been good and faithful adherents of mine both in the theater and in the cinema," he wrote. "No one has a keener appreciation of what the

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<sup>134</sup> Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism*, New York University Press, New York, 1999, 3.

<sup>135</sup> Mosley, *Zanuck*, 130-131.

<sup>136</sup> *Recollections of Nunnally Johnson*, 24.

<sup>137</sup> Robert M. Fells, *George Arliss: The Man Who Played God*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2004, 135-136

<sup>138</sup> George Hembert Westley, *Rothschild*, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection, Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California

<sup>139</sup> Maude T. Howell and Sam Mintz, *Outline: Rothschild*, July 27, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

world of science and art and literature owes to the Jews than I, and no one has greater sympathy with them in their unequal fight against savagery and ignorance.”<sup>140</sup>

Once in England, Arliss began conducting research into the history of the Rothschild family. He became fascinated with the most up-to-date work on the subject, Count Egon Caesar Corti’s *The Rise of the House of Rothschild*, which had just been translated from German into English.<sup>141</sup> The count had made his biases clear from the start: he was telling “the story of an unseen but infinitely powerful driving force which permeated the whole of the nineteenth century.”<sup>142</sup> The story began with Mayer Amschel Rothschild, a sly old man who kept one set of accounts for himself and another for the tax collector (a pure speculation) and who had built a well-concealed cellar under his house to hide his money. The old man passed his cleverness on to his son Nathan, who twenty-five years later supported the British army with one purpose in mind – the first principle of the House of Rothschild: to “increase the possibility of financial gain, which in turn would serve to increase its power.”<sup>143</sup>

Arliss was inspired by all this – much more inspired than by Howell and Mintz’s adaptation of Westley’s play, which soon arrived in the mail. The adaptation contained a few parallels to the current situation in Germany, but it needed something more.<sup>144</sup> Just then Arliss had an inspiration. He would start the film by playing Mayer Amschel in the Frankfurt ghetto, and after a brief sequence indicating the passage of time, he would play Nathan in England. He sat down in the tiny study of his country cottage and he typed out fourteen pages of suggestions which he mailed immediately to Zanuck.<sup>145</sup> At this point Sam Mintz disappeared from the project and Maude Howell wrote a new outline based on Arliss’s suggestions.<sup>146</sup> Then Zanuck asked Nunnally Johnson to rewrite the script once again.<sup>147</sup> In a matter of weeks, *The House of Rothschild* had become an entirely different film.<sup>148</sup>

Here was how Arliss and Zanuck chose to represent the Jew on the screen just one year after the Nazis came to power in Germany:

It was close to six p.m., the time when the Frankfurt ghetto had to be locked up for the night, and an old man with a long beard and a yarmulke was peering out his window. He seemed very worried. “Mama,” he murmured to his wife, “the money hasn’t come yet.” His wife replied that he should wait until the morning. “Yes,” he said, “but if anything should happen – *all that money*.” The old man rubbed his hands together: “*Ten*

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<sup>140</sup> “A.H. Wiggin Sailing For Berlin Today: Strawn, Filene, Arliss and Mrs. H. F. Whitney Are Other Bremen Passengers,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1933; Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios*, 223-224; Fells, *George Arliss*, 136.

<sup>141</sup> Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios*, 224-225; Fells, *George Arliss*, 135.

<sup>142</sup> Count Egon Cæsar Corti, *The Rise of the House of Rothschild 1770-1830*, Blue Ribbon Books, New York, 1928, vii.

<sup>143</sup> Corti, *Rise of the House of Rothschild*, 9, 51, 59, 75, 126-127.

<sup>144</sup> Howell and Mintz, *Outline: Rothschild*, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

<sup>145</sup> Arliss, *My Ten Years in the Studios*, 224-225; George Arliss, *Suggestions: Rothschild*, September 5, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

<sup>146</sup> Howell, *Outline: The Great ‘Rothschild’*, September 11, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

<sup>147</sup> Howell and Nunnally Johnson, *Rothschild*, September 14, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

<sup>148</sup> Howell and Johnson, *The Great Rothschilds*, September 23, 1933; Howell and Johnson, *First Temp.: The Great Rothschilds*, October 28, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.



*thousand gulden!*" The figure seemed to surprise his wife, so he explained: "Seven thousand in one lump from Prince Louis' crown agent, and then all the small sums – ten thousand at least." "Ah, we should be thankful Mayer," she said with a laugh. "Business is good, eh?"

Mayer Amschel sat down at his desk to count his earnings. He chuckled as he remembered how one of his customers had tried to outsmart him earlier in the day. "There he sat," Mayer recalled, "sly and smiling, planning to rob this poor old Jew Rothschild!" Mayer laughed out loud and then he noticed something terrible. One of the coins that the customer had given him was a fake. "A whole gulden!" Mayer shouted. His wife chewed on the coin to confirm that he was right. "And I gave him some of the wine too," Mayer complained, "some of the *good* wine!" The old man cursed a while longer, but gradually his temper subsided, and he even started to smile. The customer would return. Mayer would make his gulden back.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. It was Mayer's son Nathan, a fifteen-year-old boy, and he was frantic. "Mama," he said, "the tax collector!" His words set off a familiar routine. Mayer packed up the money and the account books. Nathan opened the trapdoor to the cellar and carried the incriminating materials downstairs. His brothers Solomon and Amschel hid everything behind the casks of wine. Meanwhile Mayer took out another account book and changed into dirty old clothes. His wife gave her youngest sons a few crusts of bread. She asked them whether they were hungry and they said no. "Then look hungry," she said sternly.

When the tax collector entered the house, Mayer started complaining: "Never have I known such a bad month." But the tax collector was no fool. He looked at the fake books and threw them down. He announced that he was going to assess Mayer 20,000 gulden. Mayer wailed and said that he could barely raise 1,000. The tax collector was not listening, for he had just noticed the trapdoor leading to the cellar. He walked down the stairs and looked around, and he was about to discover the real books when Nathan diverted his attention by pouring him a glass of wine. The tax collector fell for the trick, but said he was going to assess Mayer 20,000 gulden anyway. After some bargaining, he agreed to accept 2,000, along with a personal bribe of 5,000 more, and then he left.

At 6 p.m. exactly, Mayer's messenger arrived with bad news. The 10,000 gulden that Mayer had been expecting had been stolen. The old man's mood suddenly changed. He had been celebrating his good luck with the tax collector and explaining – in Zanuck's words – "the Jewish psychology and necessity for giving bribes."<sup>149</sup> Now he flew into a rage. He ranted about the mistreatment of Jews everywhere, and just before fainting from exhaustion he screamed the only solution: "WORK AND STRIVE FOR MONEY! MONEY IS POWER! MONEY IS THE ONLY WEAPON THAT THE JEW HAS TO DEFEND HIMSELF WITH!"

The film up to this point had been more-or-less consistent with Corti's account in *Rise of the House of Rothschild*. Corti had been trying to characterize Mayer as a stingy old man who sought only to acquire wealth, and – problematic as that account was – it provided the basis for George Arliss's portrayal. The next scene was different.

Mayer was lying on his deathbed, surrounded by his sons. He told them always to obey their mother if they wanted to grow rich. Then he signaled for them to come closer

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<sup>149</sup> *Conference with Mr. Zanuck and Mr. Arliss: The Great Rothschilds*, November 1, 1933, Twentieth Century Fox Scripts Collection.

and he spoke under his breath. “Much money is lost through sending gold by coach from one country to another... You are five brothers. I want you each to start a banking business in a different country. One to go and open a house in Paris, one in Vienna, one in London. Choose the most important centers. So that when money is to be sent from here to London, let us say, you won’t have to risk life and gold. Amschel here in Frankfurt will just send a letter to Nathan in London saying ‘Pay so-and-so,’ and that will be offset by loans from London to Frankfurt.

“In your day, there will be many wars in Europe,” Mayer continued, “and nations that have money to transport will come to the Rothschilds, *because it will be safe.*” Mayer’s wife cautioned him not to get too excited but he went on: “Remember: unity is strength. All your lives you must stand by one another. No one brother must be allowed to fail while another brother succeeds. Your five banking houses may cover Europe, but you will be one firm – one family – the Rothschilds, who work always together. *That will be your power.*

“And remember this before all: that neither business, nor power, nor all the gold in Europe will bring you happiness, till we – our people – have equality, respect, dignity. To trade with dignity; to live with dignity; *to walk the world with dignity.*”

It was the most important moment for the Jew in American cinema. Arliss would always claim that the scene was based on historical evidence from Corti’s book, but Corti had made it clear that only two sons were living in Frankfurt at the time of Mayer’s death. Nathan had left for England of his own accord, and James and Solomon were living in France. “These facts,” Corti had written, “proved as they are by the French police records, and the records of the visés issued, are fatal to the well known legend, according to which Meyer Amschel gathered his five sons about his deathbed and divided Europe amongst them.”<sup>150</sup> In other words, Mayer could never have imagined – much less engineered – a grand scheme by which his sons would control the finances of Europe.

Furthermore, Mayer’s final words in the film – “to walk the world with dignity” – were not quite as noble as they seemed. Although Mayer did strive to obtain equal rights for Jews in his lifetime, Arliss and Zanuck did not put these words in his mouth for the purpose of historical accuracy.<sup>151</sup> They were much more interested in making a poignant remark about the fate of the Jews of Europe. They probably supposed that no one in Hollywood would fault them for such high-mindedness at this particular point in time. But an influential group in the Jewish community recognized that the message hardly cancelled out the sheer lack of dignity that characterized the rest of the picture.

For several years, the Anti-Defamation League of the B’nai B’rith (ADL) had been growing increasingly concerned with the American film industry. In the late 1920s and early 1930s the ADL had objected to the portrayal of Jews in a few pictures including Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings*, a historical reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>152</sup> After Hitler came to power in Germany, a different problem emerged: anti-Semitism

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<sup>150</sup> Corti, *Rise of the House of Rothschild*, 107-108.

<sup>151</sup> Corti, *Rise of the House of Rothschild*, 103; Niall Ferguson, *The House of Rothschild: Moneys Prophets, 1798-1848*, Viking, 1998, 75-76.

<sup>152</sup> *The King of Kings*, dir. Cecil B. DeMille, DeMille Pictures Corporation, 1927; “By Requests of Jews, DeMille is Modifying ‘King of Kings,’” *Variety*, January 11, 1928; Leon L. Lewis to Richard E. Gutstadt, August 4, 1933; Lewis to Gutstadt, December 21, 1933, Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles’ Community Relations Committee Collection (LACRC), Urban Archives Center, California State University, Northridge

became increasingly rampant in the United States, and one of its most persistent manifestations was the claim that the film industry was in the hands of Jews. The ADL investigated the matter by collecting the names of the most influential Jews in Hollywood, and concluded that “the industry is vulnerable and the popular conception of Jewish control and responsibility is not far wrong.”<sup>153</sup>

In August 1933, the national secretary of the ADL, Richard Gutstadt, decided it was time to take action. He wrote to the former national secretary, Leon Lewis, who was now retired and living in Los Angeles, and suggested the idea of forming a local committee to deal with all film matters.<sup>154</sup> Lewis joined forces with Edgar Magnin, the rabbi and personal friend of the Hollywood studio executives, and together they tried to think up ways of fixing the problem.<sup>155</sup> They were not interested in fighting anti-Semitism head-on, for the ADL was a conservative organization that mostly worked behind the scenes, so instead they tried to prevent the production of the first anti-Nazi film, *The Mad Dog of Europe*. This was an amateurish independent production that was bound to be a financial failure, but if it were made, they reasoned, the studios would be accused of flooding America with Jewish propaganda.<sup>156</sup> The ADL worked closely with the MPPDA to ensure that *The Mad Dog of Europe* was shelved.<sup>157</sup>

Then *The House of Rothschild* emerged. When Lewis first received word that Twentieth Century was working on this production, he was deeply dismayed. “Just between us,” he wrote to Gutstadt, “the lack of understanding upon selecting this particular story for production at this time is a good illustration of the mental caliber of some of our outstanding movie magnates.”<sup>158</sup> Lewis knew that whatever angle the producers adopted, the subject of the film was bound to cause innumerable problems. By late December, the ADL’s experts on anti-Semitism had all read the script and found that it contained “chicanery and other despicable incidents and traits.”<sup>159</sup> Everyone arrived at the same conclusion: “It’s dynamite.”<sup>160</sup>

The ADL eventually formulated a very clear position about the dangers of *The House of Rothschild* by envisioning the impact of the two main parts of its plot. The opening sequence, they said, portrayed the Jew as an international banker who outsmarted the tax authorities and amassed so much wealth that he possessed even greater power than the government. The rest of the film – in which Nathan Rothschild made bargains with the allied nations so that they could defeat Napoleon – characterized the Jew as the secret power behind the throne who regulated the destiny of the world.<sup>161</sup>

The ADL of course recognized that the official message of the film was different: the Rothschilds were unfairly discriminated against, they wanted to obtain equal rights

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<sup>153</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 20, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>154</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, August 23, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>155</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, December 18, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>156</sup> Principal Distributing Corporation to Gutstadt, August 7, 1933; Lewis to Sam Jaffe, August 7, 1933; Lewis to Al Lichtman, August 7, 1933; Gutstadt to Lewis, August 28, 1933; Gutstadt to Lewis, October 16, 1933; Gutstadt to Lewis, October 30, 1933, LACRC. Also see Felicia Herman, “Hollywood, Nazism, and the Jews, 1933-41,” *American Jewish History*, 89, 1, 2001, 61-89

<sup>157</sup> Gutstadt to Samuel Untermyer, October 30, 1933; Gutstadt to Lewis, October 30, 1933; Gutstadt to Lewis, November 3, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>158</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 7, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>159</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, December 20, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>160</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, December 22, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>161</sup> Sigmund Livingston to ADL Representatives, Confidential Memo, March 20, 1934, LACRC.

for their people, and they used money for peace and not war. The ADL even recognized that some Jewish audiences might respond positively to these moments. But the ADL was not concerned with the Jewish response to the film; it was only interested in the response of non-Jews. And the organization was absolutely convinced that to the non-Jewish mind, these redemptive elements would either go unnoticed or would not be considered justification for the Rothschilds' behavior. "The impression which will be made," the ADL noted, "is that the concentration of wealth in the hands of one international Jewish family invested that family with indisputable power to determine the destinies of nations. The very fact that Christian nations must beg of the Jewish Rothschild family money with which to protect their own existence will in itself create a most undesirable reaction."<sup>162</sup>

The ADL rushed to action. Leon Lewis wrote to Joe Schenck and called for the abandonment of the production. He said that a wave of anti-Semitic propaganda was just then sweeping across the country and convincing Americans that the "international Jewish banker" was in control of the world's finances. *The House of Rothschild* by its very subject matter would enforce that myth. In case Schenck had any uncertainty whatsoever, Lewis urged him to communicate "with those among our people... who have been devoting all their energies in the past few months to stemming the rising tide of hatred against the Jews."<sup>163</sup>

Schenck read the letter and passed it on to Zanuck. Zanuck replied immediately. He had no intention of abandoning his production of *The House of Rothschild*. "I am not a Jew," he added, "and I have never heard of this 'rising hatred of the Jews' that you speak about in your letter, and am inclined to believe that it is, more or less, imaginary as far as the general public is concerned. We make pictures for the broad general public rather than the minority and I will guarantee you that if there is such a thing as a 'rising hatred of the Jew in America' our film version of ROTHSCHILD will do more to stop it than anything, from the standpoint of entertainment."<sup>164</sup>

The members of the ADL ceased all communication with Zanuck at this point, and focused their energies on Will Hays, the head of the MPPDA.<sup>165</sup> This was a wise move because Twentieth Century was just then trying to obtain membership in the national film organization. Hays listened to the ADL's position and wrote an urgent letter to Zanuck:

It is important that nothing be done now that might possibly feed the unreasoning prejudice against the Jews which is in some places. A widespread factor in this unfair and prejudiced attack is the false allegation that all Jews acquire money for power, with the inference that such power may be misused.

The historical prominence of the house of Rothschild is such that hostile propagandists have tried to make the very name a synonym for sinister, world-wide political power, growing out of accumulated riches. The fact that in the case of the Rothschilds the power of money was rightly used may be overshadowed by the greater impression of the Rothschilds as an example of Jewish power through domination by money.

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<sup>162</sup> Livingston to ADL Representatives, March 20, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>163</sup> Lewis to Joseph Schenck, December 20, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>164</sup> Zanuck to Lewis, December 21, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>165</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 23, 1933, LACRC.

Hays repeated that he was extremely worried about the situation. He said that there would probably be some difference of opinion within the Jewish community, but that “thinking Jews” would almost certainly interpret *The House of Rothschild* as anti-Semitic propaganda.<sup>166</sup>

Zanuck found himself in a bit of trouble. He needed to change Hays’ mind about the film. He quickly obtained a whole series of positive reactions to *The House of Rothschild* and forwarded them to the Hays Office. He included 175 preview cards which praised the picture and said nothing about its “Jewish flavor”; a letter from Joseph Jonah Cummins, the editor of a Jewish newspaper, who said the picture was extremely entertaining and contained no trace of propaganda; and a sermon by Reverend C.F. Aked entitled “George Arliss in *The House of Rothschild*: A Joy and an Inspiration.”<sup>167</sup>

The material had a definite impact. Hays soon informed the ADL that most audiences were finding *The House of Rothschild* so entertaining and captivating that they were not picking up on its offensive implications. He also pointed out that the Council of Jewish Women of Los Angeles had recently previewed the picture and officially approved of it. He was now less worried about the film itself and more worried about potential public disagreement between the two Jewish organizations.<sup>168</sup> The ADL understood his concern, and was angry with the Council of Jewish Women, but was more worried about the film.<sup>169</sup>

The ADL therefore went to its last resort: the heads of the other Hollywood studios. Upon discovering that Louis B. Mayer owned the majority of Twentieth Century Pictures, the ADL sent him a cable: “OUR SITUATION AT THIS TIME MORE CRITICAL THAN ANY TIME HERETOFORE DEMANDING OF EACH THE GREATEST CAUTION STOP IN NORMAL TIMES NO HARM MIGHT BE ANTICIPATED ACUTE CONDITIONS NOW MUST BE CONSIDERED STOP WILL YOU COOPERATE TO PREVENT PICTURE AT LEAST DURING CRITICAL PERIOD.”<sup>170</sup> Mayer replied that he was unwilling to take action by intervening in the running of Twentieth Century, since his stake in the company was not generally known, but he was also head of the Motion Pictures Producers’ Organization, and he agreed to consider the request along with Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures. The two executives watched the movie together and cabled back their response. They disagreed with the position of the ADL. There was nothing wrong with *The House of Rothschild*, and in fact both executives had received requests to make such a picture before.<sup>171</sup>

The ADL urged Jewish leaders everywhere to inundate Mayer with letters of protest.<sup>172</sup> At the same time Richard Gutstadt contacted the organization’s secret weapon, Rabbi Edgar Magnin, who was close friends with Mayer. “His influence with Mayer

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<sup>166</sup> Hays to Zanuck, December 21, 1933, PCA File on *The House of Rothschild*.

<sup>167</sup> Joseph Breen to Hays, March 6, 1934; Joseph Jonah Cummins to Zanuck, March 16, 1934; Reverend C.F. Aked, “George Arliss in *The House of Rothschild*: A Joy and An Inspiration,” PCA File on *The House of Rothschild*.

<sup>168</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, March 16, 1934; Lewis to Gutstadt, March 16, 1934; Gutstadt to Lewis, March 17, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>169</sup> Gutstadt to Schonberg, March 23, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>170</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 7, 1933; Livingston to Louis B. Mayer, December 21, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>171</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 21, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>172</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 21, 1933, LACRC.

ought to be utilized *now*,” Gutstadt wrote.<sup>173</sup> As it turned out, Mayer got to Magnin first. The most powerful man in the business had received many telegrams about the film and was worried and did not know what to do. Magnin responded without sympathy. He “lit into Mayer”:

He told him that the conditions in the industry were responsible for a great deal of the prejudice existing and that it is ironical that on top of it they should show so little sense as to promote a film of this type at this time. He said they were digging their own graves and that they would alienate the Jews as well.<sup>174</sup>

At the same time as Magnin was working on Mayer, another member of the ADL, Allie Freed, was working on Harry Warner. It turned out that Warner did not need much working on. He felt personally responsible for the mess since he had sold Twentieth Century the script in the first place. He told Freed that the film threatened to be one of the most dangerous productions of all time. He was so concerned that he even offered to pay \$15,000 to have Twentieth Century destroy the print. “IN ALL OF THIS, HE DOES NOT WANT HIS NAME MENTIONED,” Freed wrote.<sup>175</sup> The ADL suspected that Warner did not want word to get out that he had tried to suppress the production of a rival company.

In the end, though, neither Louis B. Mayer nor Harry Warner used their money or their power to buy out Darryl Zanuck. The primary documents provide no hint as to why the two executives backed down at this crucial stage. But the answer may be contained in the film itself. At one key moment Nathan Rothschild bought wildly on the stock exchange in an effort to bankrupt his gentile competitors. Perhaps Mayer and Warner were worried that if they bought out Darryl Zanuck they would be imitating Nathan Rothschild’s behavior in the film and enforcing the stereotype of the Jew.

Of course, that possibility is extremely remote. Mayer and Warner were businessmen, and the more convincing scenario is that they simply did not want to involve themselves in a film which they had not made. And yet the film did involve *them*. After all, it began with a Jewish father named Mayer who schemed with his five sons to create a powerful empire. *The House of Rothschild* on closer inspection was not about the Jewish banking family of Europe at all; it was about the origins of the Hollywood executives. Zanuck had created a disguised attack on the studio system as a conspiracy run by Jews – Louis B. Mayer at the top, and the heads of the other five studios directly beneath him: Harry and Jack Warner, Harry Cohn, William Fox, Carl Laemmle, and Adolph Zukor. Did these men – some of whom had financed *The House of Rothschild* themselves – recognize that Zanuck was talking about them? Whether they did or not, they allowed his image of the Jew to appear on the screen.

On March 14, 1934, *The House of Rothschild* premiered at the Astor Theater in New York. For the most part it received excellent reviews. A few critics picked up on the parallels to the situation in Germany; everyone picked up on the jokes. After five weeks of sold-out screenings, *Time* magazine featured George Arliss “in whiskers and skullcap” on the cover, and praised the film’s superb entertainment in the accompanying article:

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<sup>173</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, December 14, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>174</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, December 23, 1933, LACRC.

<sup>175</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, December 14, 1933, LACRC.

The House of Rothschild (Twentieth Century) begins with old Mayer Amschel Rothschild... as a wheedling Frankfort moneybroker. The loss of a few gulden in a messenger robbery sets him yowling like an alley cat. When the tax-collector comes down Jew street, stingy old Rothschild whisks his money bags into the cellar, gives each of his children a crust to gnaw, pops the roastbeef into a garbage box, and talks the collector into taking a bribe. As shrewd as he is stingy, Mayer Amschel Rothschild gets a good idea on his death bed...<sup>176</sup>

A typical review. Of course, later in the film the inhabitants of Jew Street would experience persecution, and in these images Hollywood would be exposing the situation in Germany for the first time. But as the review in *Time* magazine proved, such exposure came at a terrible cost: the reinforcement of the stereotype of the international Jewish banker.<sup>177</sup>

Several Jewish organizations were prepared to accept that cost. Rabbi Stephen Wise, the head of the American Jewish Congress in New York, gave a sermon on *The House of Rothschild* which was “one of the most magnificent tributes ever paid a picture.”<sup>178</sup> And a small group in Hollywood affiliated with the B’nai B’rith – whose motto was “A smile will go a long, long way” – offered Zanuck an honorary fellowship in recognition of his “outstanding achievement benefiting the Jewish people.”<sup>179</sup> Zanuck was too busy to attend the ceremony. His film had come close to winning the Oscar for Best Picture, and was now propelling him to even greater glory. In May 1935, Twentieth Century merged with Fox Pictures, and Zanuck became the head of the third largest studio in Hollywood, Twentieth Century-Fox.<sup>180</sup>

But the ADL remained convinced that *The House of Rothschild* had been a travesty and wanted to make sure that nothing like it would ever happen again. “It is just too bad that it was made at this time,” one representative wrote, “for it corroborates the basic Nazi propaganda, and this corroboration is furnished by Jews.”<sup>181</sup> The irony was almost unbearable. The ADL had gone through all the established channels and had not been able to prevent the release of the picture. Clearly the organization needed to adopt a different approach.

Will Hays agreed. Up to this point he had helped the ADL achieve a few small successes, but *The House of Rothschild* proved that something else needed to be done. “The objectionable films,” Hays’ employees pointed out, “are made so often in studios controlled by Jews that [the MPPDA] cannot be expected to carry on a program of education without some direct approach... by a Jewish group to these producers

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<sup>176</sup> “Cinema: Up From Jew Street,” *Time*, March 26, 1934.

<sup>177</sup> The single dissenting review put the matter this way: “The traits held up for admiration are cunning, avarice, and revenge; and these are traits which are neither admirable nor peculiarly Jewish. If one may add a paradox of one’s own to the many paradoxes with which this film is bristling, one would like to suggest that it really amounts to a libel on the race which it pretends to champion.” William Troy, “Films: Bankers and Technicolor,” *The Nation*, April 4, 1934.

<sup>178</sup> Zanuck to Breen, April 10, 1934, PCA File on *The House of Rothschild*.

<sup>179</sup> S.Y. Allen to Zanuck, April 11, 1934, PCA File on *The House of Rothschild*; Gutstadt to Lewis, April 26, 1934; Lewis to Gutstadt, April 30, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>180</sup> Fells, *George Arliss*, 143; Mosley, *Zanuck*, 142, 150-153.

<sup>181</sup> Edward Zeisler to Lewis, March 22, 1934, LACRC.

themselves.”<sup>182</sup> The ADL, in other words, needed to meet more regularly with the producers and provide more systematic guidance for the representation of the Jew on the screen.

So at precisely the moment that *The House of Rothschild* was hitting theaters across the United States, the ADL was taking preventative measures for the future. On March 9, 1934, a new organization came into existence in Hollywood, the Los Angeles Jewish Community Committee (LAJCC).<sup>183</sup> Leon Lewis, the founder of the organization, quickly created a separate Motion Picture Committee, and was joined by representatives from each of the major studios including Irving Thalberg, Harry Cohn, Joseph Schenck, and Jack Warner. This distinguished group would meet once per month for the sole purpose of discussing Jewish matters.<sup>184</sup> “For the first time,” Lewis wrote, “we have established a real basis for cooperation with the Motion Picture Industry and I hope for splendid results hereafter.”<sup>185</sup>

When Will Hays announced a major campaign to clean up American movies four months later and named Joseph Breen as the supreme enforcer of the Production Code, the LAJCC seized on the moment to solidify its own new arrangement with the motion picture companies. On the afternoon of July 11, 1934, all the major film executives met with Hays about the new censorship plan.<sup>186</sup> Immediately afterwards the Jews among them adjourned to Harry Cohn’s office at Columbia Pictures to meet with Richard Gutstadt, the head of the ADL. The usual members of the Motion Picture Committee were present along with Louis B. Mayer, David Selznick, Harry Warner, and Carl Laemmle Jr. Gutstadt pleaded with the group to avoid the carelessness that had characterized their productions of the past year. The various executives responded sympathetically and suggested ways of preventing obnoxious depictions of Jews in the future. The meeting was a great success, and the ADL was convinced that from then on there would be “a much quicker and much more hearty cooperation” between the two groups.<sup>187</sup>

The ADL was absolutely right. In the year following the establishment of the Motion Picture Committee, most references to Jews were cut out of Hollywood productions. Adolph Zukor, the head of Paramount, promised that Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Crusades* would “not refer to the Jews in any manner or form.”<sup>188</sup> RKO agreed to turn a ruthless Jewish businessman in *Success at Any Price* into a non-Jew.<sup>189</sup> Twentieth Century cut Jewish characters out of its picture *Born to Be Bad*.<sup>190</sup> And Louis B. Mayer completely cancelled *The Merchant of Venice* as well as a picture about the crucifixion of Christ called *Two Thieves*. “We need have no fear as to the outcome,” Lewis assured

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<sup>182</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, March 21, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>183</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, March 9, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>184</sup> Lewis to Gutstadt, March 21, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>185</sup> Lewis to Golden, March 14, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>186</sup> “Breen to be Hays Group Code Chief: Appointment Marks First Important Step of Industry to Regulate Self,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1934; “Supreme Censorship Power Given to Hays,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1934; “Hays Plan Due Today: Self-Censorship Parley Called,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1934; “Hollywood Takes Step to Assure Clean Film,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1934.

<sup>187</sup> Lewis to Livingston, July 13, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>188</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, August 1, 1934; Lewis to Gutstadt, September 17, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>189</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, March 23, 1934; Gutstadt to Schonberg, March 29, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>190</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, June 25, 1934, LACRC.



Gutstadt about this final picture, “in view of the splendid cooperation that we have always had from M.G.M.”<sup>191</sup>

Still, Gutstadt was not entirely satisfied. After the traumatic *Rothschild* experience, he wanted to get rid of all possible references to Jews. “It is just as essential to avoid obviously pro-Jewish propaganda in films as it is to obviate the drawbacks of anti-Semitic films,” he once wrote to Lewis.<sup>192</sup> Over the course of the decade his letters became more and more hysterical. He wrote to Lewis about foreign films, shorts, and cartoons, and then he started writing about films that had nothing to do with Jews whatsoever because – as he put it – “you can’t tell what might come out of Hollywood.”<sup>193</sup>

After winning the battle on the screen, the ADL began putting its energies into the other art forms. Soon Jewish references were being deleted from reprint editions of novels: Bar Mitzvah became “confirmation,” *blintzes* became pancakes, and kosher meat just became meat. On the stage and over the radio, Jewish dialect comedians were being heard less and less frequently. In Hollywood, Jewish character actors were finding it virtually impossible to obtain work at all.<sup>194</sup>

And so the Jew, once so prominent in American culture, was suddenly nowhere to be found. In 1944 Ben Hecht wrote, “The greatest single Jewish phenomenon in our country in the last twenty years has been the almost complete disappearance of the Jew from American fiction, stage, radio, and movies.” The consequences, in his opinion, were disastrous.

One of the most concrete and important reasons for the increase of American anti-Semitism is this vanishing of the Jew. A generation has grown up without having seen or heard of a Jew – except as a massacre victim or “a world menace”... Only the anti-Semites speak and write of Jews... And for this false oblivion and for this dangerous exile, the movies are the most to blame.<sup>195</sup>

Hecht was the first person to detect and criticize the disappearance of the Jew from American culture. He understood that this disappearance began on the American screen. But he obviously knew nothing about *The House of Rothschild*. Had he known the story behind that film he would have told it, right up to its horrific end.

The Nazis had been fascinated by *The House of Rothschild* ever since the picture first appeared in theaters worldwide. Back in May 1934, when the screenings were in full swing, the German ambassador in London and the German consul general in Seattle had

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<sup>191</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, November 15, 1934; Lewis to Gutstadt, November 19, 1934; Lewis to Abraham W. Brussel, July 13, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>192</sup> Gutstadt to unknown recipient, November 1, 1934, LACRC.

<sup>193</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, February 7, 1935, LACRC. For examples of Gutstadt’s many letters, see Gutstadt to Arthur Rosenblum, November 16, 1934; Gutstadt to Lewis, December 18, 1934; Gutstadt to Lewis, January 21, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, February 4, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, February 27, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, March 15, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, April 22, 1935; Gutstadt to Mendel Silberberg, June 24, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, July 29, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, August 6, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, August 20, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, October 4, 1935; Gutstadt to Lewis, November 5, 1935; Gutstadt to Silberberg, March 3, 1936, LACRC.

<sup>194</sup> Henry Popkin, “The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture,” *Commentary*, 14, 1952, 46-55.

<sup>195</sup> Hecht, *A Guide for the Bedevilled*, 207, 209-210.

watched it with interest. Both had picked up on the film's double-edged portrayal of Jews. The ambassador in London noted that the film provided unfortunate parallels to the situation in Germany at the same time as it showed the "shabby meanness and cunning manipulation" of the Jewish moneylender.<sup>196</sup> The consul general in Seattle made a similar observation before concluding that the film would never be shown in Germany. He was not exactly right.<sup>197</sup>

On November 28, 1940, the notorious propaganda picture *The Eternal Jew* premiered at theaters throughout Germany. This documentary about "the problem of world Jewry" – released to coincide with the first deportations of Jews to Eastern Europe – began by contrasting the Aryan's inclination to work with the Jew's inherent tendency to live off the work of others. Outwardly Jews looked just like everyone else. But their inner nature compelled them to loan, barter, and trade, and around 350 B.C. they spread like rats throughout Europe. They gravitated towards the wealthiest nations, growing richer and richer, and in the early nineteenth century a few Jews acquired international power.<sup>198</sup>

At this point – twenty-one minutes into the picture – the narrator of *The Eternal Jew* made an announcement.

Here we show a scene from a film about the Rothschild family. It was made by American Jews, obviously as a tribute to one of the greatest names in Jewish history. They honor their hero in a typically Jewish manner, delighting in the way old Mayer Amschel Rothschild cheats his host state by feigning poverty to avoid paying taxes.

And there it was: the original scene from *The House of Rothschild* with accurate German subtitles. No embellishment was necessary. The narrator simply allowed the images to unfold before the viewers' eyes. When the scene shifted to Mayer on his deathbed, the narrator interjected just once.

Transfer of money by check was not a Jewish invention nor was it cultivated by Jews for the good of mankind. It served them as a means of obtaining international influence over their host peoples.

The rest of the scene was self-explanatory. Old Mayer Amschel made his sons promise to support each other, and he told them about the power they would soon acquire. The film cut just in time to leave out the line about Jewish dignity at the end.<sup>199</sup>

For years, historians have cited *The Eternal Jew* as one of the most atrocious examples of Nazi propaganda. But the picture was unthinkable without *The House of Rothschild*. The images of Mayer Amschel provided structure to what would otherwise have been a jumble of the regime's usual anti-Semitism. The first twenty minutes of the

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<sup>196</sup> German Embassy in London to Foreign Office, May 26, 1934, Politische Propaganda, Rome 835a, volume 2, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>197</sup> German Consulate in Seattle to German Embassy in Washington D.C., May 15, 1934, Politische Propaganda, Rome 835a, volume 2, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>198</sup> *Der ewige Jude*, dir. Fritz Hippler, Deutsche Filmherstellungs- und -Verwertungs- GmbH, 1940.

<sup>199</sup> The Nazis had commissioned their own anti-Semitic film about the House of Rothschild, entitled *The Rothschilds*, which had been released several months before *The Eternal Jew*, but they chose to use the much more powerful images from the American version for the notorious documentary.

documentary established the Jew's natural cleverness with money. Then the images of Mayer Amschel pointed to the real threat: the wealthiest Jews were taking over the world. The narrator explained this connection.

The House of Rothschild is just one example of the use of this tactic by the Jews to spread their net of financial influence over the working man... By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jews are sitting at all the junctions of the world's money market. They are an international power. Though they make up only one percent of the population of the earth, their capital enables them to terrorize world exchanges, world opinion, and world politics.

There was just one possible course of action. The film turned to the supreme authority on the Jewish problem, Adolf Hitler, in his speech to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939. "Should the international finance Jews inside and outside Europe push people into another world war," he said, "the result will not be a victory of Jewry but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

From the day Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, American movie studios collaborated with his regime in two distinct ways – one direct and intentional, the other more subtle and complex. The first form of collaboration resulted from the experiences around *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Hell's Angels* and from the subsequent establishment of section fifteen of the quota regulations. For seven or eight years, the Hollywood studios agreed not to attack the Nazis in any of their productions, and in return they were permitted to continue doing business in Germany. During the first few months of the agreement, the studios held painstaking conferences with Freudenthal and other German representatives around films including *Captured!* (Warner Brothers), *Suicide Fleet* (RKO), and *War Mamas* (MGM).<sup>200</sup> By late 1933, the studios had understood that the new enforcer of section fifteen – Georg Gyssling, the Nazi consul general in Los Angeles – would tolerate absolutely no negative depictions of Germany on the screen.

In this early period, a couple of studios even went beyond the call of duty and made pictures that were virtually pro-German in character. MGM released *Stamboul Quest* in which the villain was a British spy and the hero was a German counter-espionage agent.<sup>201</sup> At around the same time Warner Brothers put out *Ever in My Heart*, the story of a German immigrant in America who experienced discrimination after the outbreak of the World War. He lost his job, his dog was stoned to death, and his wife's family insisted that he change his name. "They let me be a citizen," he complained, "but

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<sup>200</sup> Propaganda Ministry to all consulates, embassies, and legations, Memo on *Captured*, January 25, 1934; German Embassy in Washington D.C. to Foreign Office, February, 1934; German Consulate in New York to German Embassy in Washington D.C., January 13, 1934; German Consulate in New York to German Embassy in Washington D.C., January 31, 1934; Herron to German Consulate in New York, January 29, 1934, Politische Propaganda, Rome 835a, volume 2; Foreign Office to German Embassy in Paris, Memo on *Suicide Fleet*, March 31, 1933; Foreign Office to German Consulate in New York, 31 March 1933; German Consulate in New York to Foreign Office, March 1, 1933; German Embassy in Paris to Foreign Office, April 28, 1933, Paris 2281, Filmwesen, volume 4; Foreign Office to German Embassy in Madrid, Memo on *War Mamas*, September 30, 1932, Madrid 621, Film, volume 1, Auswärtiges Amt.

<sup>201</sup> *Stamboul Quest*, dir. Sam Wood, MGM, 1934.

they won't let me be an American." Nine months after Hitler came to power in Germany, Warner Brothers thought it appropriate to release this picture about the persecution of the poor German minority living in the United States.<sup>202</sup>

At first the Anti-Defamation League almost seemed to be pushing the studios in the direction of this first form of collaboration. The organization was primarily responsible for the cancellation of the earliest anti-Nazi film, *The Mad Dog of Europe*. Very quickly, however, the ADL changed its policy. When a new independent anti-Nazi picture entitled *Hitler's Reign of Terror* was playing in early 1934, the head of the ADL was furious to learn that the mayor of Chicago was pulling it from circulation in compliance with a request from the German consul general: "I then suggested that it was not the province of the mayor of Chicago to decide points of international law or amenity, and that if Washington felt strongly about the situation, Washington should advise him. He considered my point well taken and telephoned to the State Department, which advised him, according to my understanding, that it saw no reason why the picture should not be shown."<sup>203</sup>

Although the ADL ceased its opposition to anti-Nazi films, the organization soon began exerting a different form of pressure on the studios. Following the controversy around *The House of Rothschild*, the ADL went to great lengths to ensure that Jewish characters disappeared from American movies after 1934. The results were devastating: not only did Americans become increasingly unfamiliar with Jewish culture in this period, as Ben Hecht pointed out, but they also saw virtually no images of Germany's mistreatment of the Jews. The redemptive moments in *The House of Rothschild* – in which images of ghetto violence were displayed to the American public for the first time – turned out to be some of Hollywood's only such images until well after the end of the Second World War. *The House of Rothschild* showed evidence of the persecution of the Jews, only to abolish the possibility in the future.

The Hollywood studios therefore collaborated with Nazi Germany in their productions first by not attacking the Nazis and second by not mentioning the Jews. But there was another side to the story – the German side. From 1933 to 1940, German government officials took Hollywood movies very seriously. They watched around 400 productions which they grouped into the same three categories that Hitler had established from the very start: there were the "good," the "bad," and the "switched off."

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<sup>202</sup> *Ever in My Heart*, dir. Archie Mayo, Warner Brothers, 1933.

<sup>203</sup> Gutstadt to Lewis, April 26, 1934, LACRC.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Good”

*“Here’s one picture Germans spot as OK.”*<sup>1</sup>

From 1933 to 1940, around 250 Hollywood movies were screened throughout Germany. American commercial attachés stationed in Berlin recorded performance statistics for every one of these movies, and their reports are held today at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Unfortunately such statistics give only a vague glimpse into the actual reception of motion pictures. We know, for example, that *Broadway Melody of 1936* (MGM) was the single most successful picture in Germany in the 1930s, playing for 129 days in Berlin in its first run alone – but this statistic is a dead end for further analysis.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter draws on reviews from German newspapers and essays by government officials to isolate a specific kind of American film that the Nazis found particularly valuable in the 1930s – the propaganda film. While American critics have occasionally hinted at the fascist tendencies of certain Hollywood movies from this period, the Nazis had no doubts that the Hollywood studios produced much better, more efficient propaganda pictures than they did. The current chapter therefore turns away from the specific films Hitler deemed “good” and examines instead the films that Nazi commentators valued for the way they validated the leader principle. The Nazis occasionally used the term “fascist” in this connection, and the aim here is not to propose yet another definition of this famously troubled political category. It is, rather, to recover the Nazis’ limited use of the term in their confrontation with certain Hollywood productions.

A few films are of particular importance: *Gabriel over the White House* (Cosmopolitan and MGM); *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Paramount); and *Our Daily Bread* (Viking and United). This chapter uses the words of Nazi commentators to reconstruct the historical reception of these films in Germany and to reveal a crucial aspect of the political culture of the Third Reich – and, more frighteningly, of the United States – that has long gone unnoticed.

The meeting of the Reichstag on March 23, 1933, started out calmly enough. As the representatives filed into the Kroll Opera House – the temporary quarters since the burning of the official building a month earlier – one political party was conspicuously absent. The Communists had been blamed for the Reichstag fire, and they had all either been taken into custody or fled the scene in time. Only the Nazis, the German Nationalists, the Center Party, and the Social Democrats were present to vote on the proposals of the new administration. Outside the building, units of SS men were standing guard, their first official public duty; inside stood long rows of SA men in brownshirts. A huge swastika flag hung behind the stage. Everything was going according to plan.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Here’s one picture Germans spot as OK,” *Variety*, March 17, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> R.M. Stephenson, “German Film Notes,” July 21, 1936, Department of Commerce, Record Group 151, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>3</sup> Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, Penguin, New York, 1982 [1973], 406.

After a brief introduction by the Reichstag President, Hermann Göring, Hitler rose to give his first parliamentary address. He began in his usual manner, painting a picture of the misery and despair into which Germany had fallen. Under his administration, he said, there would be a “far-reaching moral renewal” through direct intervention in education, the media, and the arts; the unemployment problem would be solved through work-creation schemes; and the size of the army would remain unchanged as long as the rest of the world agreed to a radical disarmament. But it would be against the spirit of the national uprising for the Reichstag to involve itself in any of these efforts. In such a crisis there needed to be a clear decision in every case. The only solution was an Enabling Act which transferred all power to his administration. It would be a temporary measure, of course, and the existence of the Reichstag wouldn’t be threatened. As Hitler left the stage to wild cheering, most of the deputies rose to sing “Deutschland über Alles,” and a three hour recess was called.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Nazis and their coalition partners had won the elections of March 5, they needed a two-thirds majority for the Enabling Act to pass. With the Communists absent, it would be possible to secure the numbers by winning the support of the Center Party. Hitler had made various assurances to the party leader, Prälat Kaas, and in a closed meeting Kaas now argued that Germany was in the greatest danger. He said that there had been talk of Civil War if the measure didn’t go through. Meanwhile the guards outside were chanting, “We want the Enabling Act – or there’ll be hell to pay.” Eventually all the Center Party deputies agreed to support Kaas’s position.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the recess the Reichstag reconvened, and Otto Wels, the chairman of the Social Democrats, took the floor. For a moment the room was silent and only the distant voices of the SS men could be heard. Then Wels explained why his party was not supporting the Enabling Act. The Nazis and their nationalist allies had won the elections, he said, and that gave them the opportunity to govern constitutionally. In fact it was more than an opportunity; it was an obligation. For the German Reich to remain healthy, criticism must remain in place, and it must not be persecuted.

Suddenly Hitler flew into a rage. He raced to the platform, violently pushing away his ally Franz von Papen, who tried to restrain him, and pointing at Wels he yelled, “You come late, but still you come! The pretty theories you have just proclaimed here, Mr. Deputy, are being communicated to world history just a little too late.” Then, working himself into an even greater rage, he continued:

You talk about persecutions. I think there are only a few of us here who did not have to suffer persecution from your side in prison ... You seem to have forgotten completely that for years our shirts were ripped off our backs because you did not like the color ... We have outgrown your persecutions!

You say furthermore that criticism is salutary. Certainly, those who love Germany may criticize us; but those who worship an International cannot criticize us. Here, too, insight comes to you very late indeed Mr. Deputy. You should have recognized the salutariness of criticism during the time we were in the opposition... In those days our press was forbidden and forbidden and again forbidden, our meetings were forbidden, and we were forbidden to speak and I was forbidden to speak, for years on

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<sup>4</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 467; Fest, *Hitler*, 406-7.

<sup>5</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 467-8; Fest, *Hitler*, 407.

end. And now you say: criticism is salutary!<sup>6</sup>

The Social Democrats were shouting in protest at this point, so Göring rang the bell and said, “Stop talking nonsense now and listen to this.” Hitler picked up from where he left off:

You say: “Now they want to shunt aside the Reichstag in order to continue the revolution.” Gentlemen, if that had been our purpose we would not have needed ... to have this bill presented. By God, we would have had the courage to deal with you directly!

You also say that not even we can abolish Social Democracy because it was the first to open these seats here to the common people, to the working men and women, and not just to barons and counts. In all that, Mr. Deputy, you have come too late...

From now on we National Socialists will make it possible for the German worker to attain what he is able to demand and insist on. We National Socialists will be his intercessors. You, gentleman, are no longer needed!<sup>7</sup>

Hitler concluded by saying that the meeting taking place was nothing more than a formality: “We appeal in this hour to the German Reichstag to grant us that which we could have taken anyway.”<sup>8</sup> He looked over at the Social Democrats one last time, and told them he didn’t even want them to vote for the bill. “Germany shall be free,” he yelled, “but not through you!”<sup>9</sup>

After that there were no more disruptions. The remaining party leaders rose to declare their support for Hitler’s proposal, and a vote was taken. The result – 441 to 94 – led to the passage of the “Act for the Removal of Distress from People and Reich.”<sup>10</sup> For all practical purposes, the Reichstag ceased to exist.

The events made front-page headlines around the world the following day. “Hitler cabinet gets power to rule as a dictatorship; Reichstag quits *sine die*,” the *New York Times* announced.<sup>11</sup> It continued: “Never was there such a brute exaltation of mere strength ... In the very proclamation of the absolutely independent and ruthless Germany that it is to be ... the new German government found itself confronted with the moral condemnation of all the rest of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Buried in these sentences was the implication that such a thing could never happen in America. Nevertheless, one week later, it did. On March 31, 1933, the President of the United States gave a very similar address to Congress, and this time it was screened to thousands of viewers across the country. It was a fateful moment that would have dramatic consequences for the whole concept of American democracy. It was the premiere of the Hollywood film *Gabriel over the White House*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fest, *Hitler*, 408.

<sup>7</sup> Fest, *Hitler*, 408-9.

<sup>8</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 468.

<sup>9</sup> Fest, *Hitler*, 409.

<sup>10</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 468; Fest, *Hitler*, 410.

<sup>11</sup> “Hitler cabinet gets power to rule as a dictatorship; Reichstag quits *sine die*,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1933, 1.

<sup>12</sup> “A Moral Tribunal,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1933, E4.

<sup>13</sup> *Gabriel over the White House*, dir. Gregory La Cava, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1933.

It started out more rowdily than the Reichstag meeting. The newly elected President, Jud Hammond, had called a joint sitting of Congress, and no one quite knew why. One particularly courageous senator, Mr. Langham, began the proceedings by putting in a move for impeachment, and it was received with a mixture of protest and applause. The minute Hammond entered the chamber, though, everything turned deadly calm. He walked slowly to the podium and stood in front of a gigantic American flag. The representatives waited in silence for their President to speak.

Like Hitler, he started gloomily. He said he had arrived as a representative of the American people in their hour of darkest despair. For years Congress had been throwing away money on schemes that didn't benefit ordinary Americans. It had wasted countless hours on futile discussion. Now it was time to take action, and there was only one thing to do. He asked the representatives to declare a state of national emergency and to adjourn Congress until normal conditions were restored. For this temporary period, he would assume full responsibility for the government of the United States. All they needed to do was vote for his Emergency Act.

There was a murmur in the crowd, but only Senator Langham dared to respond. "Mr. President, this is dictatorship!" he yelled. "The United States of America is a democracy! We are not yet willing to give up the government of our fathers!"

President Hammond hardly flinched as the speaker called for order. "You *have* given it up," he said, looking Langham in the eye. "You've turned your backs. You've closed your eyes to the appeals of the people. You've been traitors to the concepts of democracy upon which this government was founded."

The President was getting more worked up now. "I believe in democracy," he declared, "as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln believed in democracy. AND IF WHAT I PLAN TO DO IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE MAKES ME A DICTATOR, THEN IT IS A DICTATORSHIP BASED ON JEFFERSON'S DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY: A GOVERNMENT FOR THE GREATEST GOOD OF THE GREATEST NUMBER!"

The majority of congressmen who were present responded with overwhelming applause. Still, Langham wouldn't give up. "This Congress refuses to adjourn," he called out, not quite as confidently as before.

"I think, gentlemen, you forget that I am still President of these United States," Hammond said softly. Then, as quickly as his temper had disappeared, it returned in full force: "AND AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARMY AND NAVY, IT IS WITHIN THE RIGHTS OF THE PRESIDENT TO DECLARE MATIAL LAW!"

Hammond's threat worked. The following day the result was announced: 390 to 16 in favor of the Emergency Act. "Congress accedes to president's request, adjourns by overwhelming vote," the *Washington Herald* reported. "Hammond dictator." Like Hitler, this American President had won through legal means what he said he could have taken anyway.

Hammond's assumption of power in the United States was just as dramatic as Hitler's in Germany, it involved people who were just as high up in the nation's political and cultural elite, and it took place at precisely the same point in time. In late January 1933, when President Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor, MGM completed the script for *Gabriel over the White House*; it previewed the first cut of the film around the time Hitler and his coalition partners won the national elections; and it released the final



version one week after the dissolution of the Reichstag. Over the course of these two months, some of the most important men in America conducted a serious discussion about how to portray the most pressing issues of the day on the screen – and the result was *Jud Hammond*.

Everything about him was unusual, not least his origins. In the summer of 1932, Thomas F. Tweed, political advisor and chief of staff to former British Prime Minister Lloyd George, took a leisurely holiday aboard a cargo vessel in the Mediterranean. Just before leaving he had read an interesting item in the news. Apparently H. Gordon Selfridge, a well known department store owner, had declared that democracy in America was coming to an end. Selfridge felt that if an “unselfish, inspiring spirit” managed the country as a gigantic business, all its problems would be solved. The people could finally tend to their own affairs while their leader did all the thinking.<sup>14</sup> Tweed was deeply impressed by this idea, and he found himself discussing it with the other passengers on board. Was Selfridge right that a benevolent dictator should adjourn Congress, abolish prohibition, and impose a sales tax, he asked them? Eventually he lost interest in their replies, and found that his confinement to the freighter “provided the boredom” necessary to come up with an answer of his own.<sup>15</sup> This Englishman who had never before written a book nor set foot on American soil started working on what was to become *Gabriel over the White House*.

Soon the legend of Jud Hammond was born. Originally a cynical politician who had risen to the presidency as a result of his good humor and charm, he suffered a terrible car accident early in his administration, and when he awoke he was possessed by an unshakeable will to solve all of America’s problems. After dissolving Congress, he managed singlehandedly to end unemployment, to assassinate all gangsters, and to bring about world peace.<sup>16</sup> Given that America was in the midst of its worst-ever economic depression, Tweed knew he had come up with a highly appealing figure.

In early January 1933, just before the novel was published anonymously in the United States, it somehow ended up in the hands of William Randolph Hearst, the head of the biggest media empire in the country.<sup>17</sup> Hearst ran Cosmopolitan Pictures, a subsidiary company of MGM, and he jumped at the idea of turning *Gabriel over the White House* into a movie. For years he had written forceful editorials in his papers while his political ambitions remained unfulfilled. Now was his chance to create a president in his own image. Working with scriptwriter Carey Wilson, he fashioned the story so that it dramatized his plans for the economic rehabilitation of the country. He wrote Hammond’s speeches entirely by himself. *Gabriel over the White House* became his pet project.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Selfridge Declares Democracy a Failure; Predicts its End within 100 or 200 Years,” *New York Times*, June 22, 1932, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Mordaunt Hall, “Gabriel over the White House,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1933, IX, 3.

<sup>16</sup> [Thomas F. Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, Farrar & Rinehart, New York, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps he acquired it through his close friend Lloyd George.

<sup>18</sup> James Wingate to Will Hays, February 11, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles; Bosley Crowther, *Hollywood Rajah: The Life and Times of Louis B. Mayer*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1960, 178; Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994, 84; David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*, Houghton Mifflin, New

While Hearst had complete control over his editorials, however, he didn't over this film. Cosmopolitan Pictures depended on MGM for all distribution and exhibition purposes, and that meant the film also had to meet with the approval of the most powerful man in Hollywood, Louis B. Mayer. This was a problem because although Mayer and Hearst were close friends, they had opposite political allegiances. In July 1932 Hearst had used all his influence to have Franklin Delano Roosevelt nominated Democratic presidential candidate. Later that year, the Hearst papers had vigorously attacked Herbert Hoover and supported Roosevelt in the lead-up to the elections.<sup>19</sup> Now, upon viewing the rough cut of *Gabriel over the White House*, Mayer supposedly thought Hearst had gone behind his back to make a piece of propaganda for the incoming president. "Put that picture in its can, take it back to the studio, and lock it up!" he is reported to have yelled after the screening.<sup>20</sup> Apparently he had interpreted the earlier, cynical Hammond as a critique of President Hoover, and the later, effective one as powerful validation for Roosevelt.

In fact, Mayer's reaction could not possibly have been so extreme. Officials from the MPPDA had been worried about *Gabriel over the White House* from the start, and they had discussed their concerns with Mayer several times in February. Mayer had told them not to worry: neither he as a Republican, nor Mr. Hearst as a Democrat, wanted to cast reflection on any national administration. Furthermore the film was being shot in such a way that up to twenty-five per cent of it could be cut if necessary.<sup>21</sup> After the preview, Mayer proceeded to do just that. Throughout March, MGM spent more time editing and doing retakes than it had on the original shooting.<sup>22</sup>

If Mayer had been worried that the film was intended as pro-Roosevelt propaganda, though, his actions certainly didn't show it, for one of the people he consulted in the editing process was Roosevelt himself. The incoming President watched the first cut of the film, and expressed concern that it was at times promoting the wrong political agenda, namely Hearst's. As one MPPDA report put it, "We run the risk of [Roosevelt's] belief that we are shaping public opinion contrary to what he may have to do."<sup>23</sup> To reduce this risk, Roosevelt proposed some changes, all of which were adopted, and by the end he seemed very pleased with the result. He sent thank-you letters to Hearst and MGM executive Nicholas Schenck, and he said he saw the film three times (presumably at the White House).<sup>24</sup>

Of course, the one person who was not at all happy about the changes was Hearst. On March 25 he wrote to Mayer to express frustration and disappointment that his vision

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York, 2000, 463-6; Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, 293-300.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Proctor, *William Randolph Hearst: Final Edition, 1911-1951*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, 153-173.

<sup>20</sup> Crowther, *Hollywood Rajah*, 179.

<sup>21</sup> Louis B. Mayer to Wingate, February 16, 1933; Wingate to Hays, February 23, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*.

<sup>22</sup> "'Gabriel' Film Sent Back to Hollywood," *New York Times*, March 17, 1933. For an exact list of retakes, see "Notes on *Gabriel over the White House*," Folder 3, MGM Collections, USC Cinematic Arts Library, Los Angeles. A shorter summary of the retakes can be found in Howard Strickling to Howard Dietz, March 20, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*. USC also holds the entire collection of *Gabriel over the White House* scripts.

<sup>23</sup> Hays, Memorandum, March 7, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*.

<sup>24</sup> Pizzitola, *Hearst over Hollywood*, 299.

had been compromised. He reluctantly accepted Roosevelt's suggestions, pointing out that they detracted from the drama of the film. "Still," he continued,

there were a lot of alterations in the picture which were not requested by the government and which in my humble opinion were in no way necessary... I think you have impaired the effectiveness of the President's speech to Congress because you have been afraid to say the things which I wrote and which I say daily in my newspapers and which you commend me for saying, but still do not sufficiently approve to put in your film... I believe the picture will still be considered a good picture and perhaps an unusually good picture. Nevertheless, I think it was a better picture.<sup>25</sup>

The end result of all this was that not one, but several men were responsible for the creation of Jud Hammond. Although Hearst had wanted the ideal president to be all his own, he had been forced to accept the changes of the real President, FDR, and the film mogul, Louis B. Mayer. That meant that while none of the three were completely satisfied with the final Hammond, they couldn't be disappointed with him either.

There was really only one other important figure who suggested changes to *Gabriel over the White House*. This was Will Hays, the conservative head of the MPPDA, whose task it was to "clean up" Hollywood pictures. Viewing the rough cut in New York in March, Hays found himself in substantial agreement with the changes proposed by Mayer and Roosevelt. He also came up with a critique of his own. Given the tremendous strain of the times, he said, it seemed dangerous to suggest that the answer to the current crisis lay somewhere other than in the accepted form of government. "The fact is hundreds of thousands of people have one eye on [Roosevelt] and one eye on God and it is a temper and state of mind that in my opinion will resent seriously a reflection on the institutions and the factors in government that have to find the solution," he wrote. "The people, in my opinion, will not sense in this picture the fact that it points to the people themselves behind their elected representative as the source of all government power but will regard it as a direct indictment of the puerility and fallibility of today's government machinery and personnel and that only by a blow in the head of the president and the consequent acts of a deranged man is enough righteousness and wisdom put into the executive branch of the government to lead."<sup>26</sup>

Despite Hays' confusing writing and lack of punctuation, he was calling attention to a problem that no one else seemed to have noticed. It was all very well for Hearst and Mayer and Roosevelt to argue about what kinds of changes their ideal president should bring about. If anything, Hays agreed with the compromise they eventually reached. But this President dissolved Congress! He threw the entire concept of democracy out the window! This film was proposing dictatorship as the solution to America's problems!

Hays thought the film could still work, but it needed a couple of changes. His first suggestion was to rework the opening scenes so that viewers wouldn't be so disenchanted with the current form of government. Mayer listened carefully to this advice and came up with the following:

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<sup>25</sup> Hearst to Mayer, March 25, 1933, carton 17, W.R. Hearst correspondence, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>26</sup> Hays, Memorandum, March 7, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*.

Hammond: Goodnight, Mr. Vice President. Hope you sleep well.  
Vice President: When did the Vice President ever do anything else?

Hammond: Well, I'm in the White House – and considerably worried.  
Brooks: Why?

Hammond: When I think of all the promises I made the people to get elected.  
Brooks: You had to make some promises. By the time they realize you're not going to keep them, your term will be over!

Hammond: Oh, thanks for those unexpected votes from Alabama.  
Congressman: Wait till you get the bill for them.

So much for Hays' first suggestion. But he had another. When a man is nominated as a candidate or elected as a president, he wrote, a distinctively American phenomenon occurs. The man undergoes a spiritual transformation which leads him to do everything possible to achieve his objective, even if he kills himself in the process. With a few changes, the same thing could happen to Hammond. If this President had just a tiny hint of responsibility upon being elected, then his later actions could be seen as the result of inspiration stemming from the democratic process.<sup>27</sup>

Here was how Hammond's transformation was ultimately depicted: Not long after his inauguration, he was driving recklessly and overtaking everything on the road. Joking with his fellow passengers, he said it was the first time he had been ahead of the newspaper men since he had been elected. He asked how fast they were going, and one passenger responded ninety-eight miles per hour. After the ensuing crash, Hammond lay in bed unconscious for several weeks, and when he awoke he looked the same but seemed completely different. In the novel, the first character to see him was his favorite nephew who ran away screaming "That isn't my uncle Jud!"<sup>28</sup> In the film, it was the President's physician who announced that the man in the room wasn't the Jud Hammond he had treated for fifteen years. "What does he say," someone asked. "He says nothing," the physician replied. "He sits there silently, reading or thinking, like a gaunt grey ghost with burning eyes that seem to see right through you." The first shot of the new Hammond captured this description perfectly: the camera tracked in extremely quickly, with far more life than the motionless figure on the chair.

Hammond had suddenly acquired mysterious powers. His famous smile had disappeared. He didn't make jokes any more. When his mistress came to visit, he called her "Miss Malloy." She took his hand and then dropped it; somehow, without him saying a word, she could sense that he disapproved. But when he did speak, his authority was

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<sup>27</sup> Hays, Memorandum, March 7, 1933, PCA file on *Gabriel over the White House*.

<sup>28</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel Over the White House*, 26. This scene was originally in the film, but, to Walter Wanger's dismay, it was cut. Twenty-three years later, the producer would use it as the basis for his *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. In that film, aliens took over human bodies and deprived them of all normal feeling. In the novel *Gabriel over the White House*, the narrator had described Hammond's transformation as follows: "It was an uncanny and indefinable feeling as if sub-consciously I almost believed that the Major we knew had died and in his place a machine in human form had been incarnated – a robot without emotion, sensibilities, or human passions of any sort." [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 39.

absolute. He met with the cabinet, and fired the Secretary of State simply for questioning his orders. Then he told the press what had happened without any embellishment whatsoever. Soon Hammond was no longer regarded as a cheap politician, but as the supreme Leader whose orders must always be obeyed. As Malloy explained in the book, “There’s something about him, something new and terribly strange which deprives you of volition – of any capacity to think and act for yourself. It is easier to give way than to continue fighting for your ego. You become content to serve – to serve – and wait his pleasure.”<sup>29</sup>

It was on the eve of the joint sitting of Congress that the source of Hammond’s power was revealed. Miss Malloy entered his study late that night to give him the final draft of his speech, and although he had written it himself, he didn’t know what it was. He looked up, stared absently into space for a few seconds, and suddenly Malloy became aware of the presence of a third being. She had known for some time that there were two Jud Hammonds. Now she understood that God had sent the angel Gabriel to do for Hammond what He had done for Daniel. The President took the speech and thanked her; outside the White House a crowd had gathered to sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic. In dissolving Congress, Hammond would be acting on their behalf – but more importantly, he would be doing the will of God.

So it was that the first major fascist motion picture appeared neither in Italy nor in Germany, but in the United States. Figures like Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin have long been cited by American historians as examples of domestic fascism.<sup>30</sup> Before they adopted their questionable policies, however, this film argued that what America needed was a dictator President. The men who made it came not from the fringes of American politics and culture but from the center. The one person even to question its premise wasn’t Roosevelt, the great democrat, but Will Hays, the puritanical motion picture reformer. For three years Hollywood had avoided making movies that drew attention to the horrendous conditions under which people were living. Finally it released one which cited all the major issues of the day – mass unemployment, racketeering, Prohibition, war debts, the proliferation of armaments – and the solution it proposed was fascism.

MGM was completely aware of this. Six months after *Gabriel over the White House* played to packed houses in the United States, the film company jumped at the idea of screening it in Germany. The local manager, Fritz Strengolt, gave a promotional interview in a trade journal called *Lichtbild-Bühne*, declaring that MGM had great trust in Germany and the German market: “We believe that the efforts of your government in the struggle against unemployment, culminating in the generous work procurement program whose effects are already starting to be apparent, will also have pleasing consequences for theater attendance.” Strengolt then said that his company was distributing a few pictures in the coming season that were of particular interest to the German public. By means of American examples, these pictures showed that certain fundamental rules that the new Germany had adopted as its guidelines were valid for the entire world. The most important by far was *Gabriel over the White House*, for it not only described current problems but also attempted to give their solution. “This film has met with extraordinary

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<sup>29</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982.

praise in the countries where the original version has already been screened,” Strengholt said. “We are sure that in Germany, where these issues lie closer to reality, the film will have an even more favorable reception.”<sup>31</sup>

Strengholt was right. *Gabriel over the White House* played for fifteen days straight when it premiered in Berlin in February 1934, and that was just its first run.<sup>32</sup> Of course Hollywood’s all-star productions from the same year outperformed it: *Queen Christina*, starring Greta Garbo, played for 44 days; *Cleopatra*, starring Claudette Colbert, played for 34; and *The Scarlett Empress*, starring Marlene Dietrich, for 25.<sup>33</sup> Still, for a medium-budget production dealing with contemporary issues, it did very well. In a fitting sign of the times, it played at the Mozartsaal, the same theater where the Nazis had successfully halted the screening of *All Quiet on the Western Front* three years earlier. Now there were no disruptions. Instead the film received highly laudatory reviews in the press. The *Völkischer Beobachter* picked up on the parallels to the German political situation.<sup>34</sup> And the film reviewer for Goebbels’ newspaper *Der Angriff* gave a truly insightful account of just what these parallels meant.

The reviewer, H. Brant, said that *Gabriel over the White House* announced the coming of a new form of government – one which had already been fully accepted in Germany and Italy. The similarities were so compelling, in fact, that the film seemed unthinkable without them. That was where the biggest surprise lay. As Brant revealed, the idea for the picture had come long before Hitler actually attained power in Germany. If ever one needed proof that the National Socialist principle had penetrated the thoughts and feelings of all modern nations, he said, this was it. Even in democratic America the principle was so deeply embedded in the collective unconscious that it had led to the creation of this remarkable film.<sup>35</sup>

Brant went on to explain just what made *Gabriel over the White House* so compelling: it was the distinctive personality of Jud Hammond. The contrast between his earlier self, inhibited by the old political system, and his new, better self, enabled by the breakthrough of the car accident, was masterly: “At first the smiling, somewhat complacent parliamentary politician,” he wrote, “then the completely transformed figure of a man possessed by a holy fanaticism, one who sees himself as above all party authority, as *Führer*, and as supporter of the interests of his entire people and of all humanity.”<sup>36</sup> In Brant’s view, it was this sudden understanding of the *Führer* principle that enabled Hammond to solve the problems first of the nation and then of the world.

When *Gabriel over the White House* was released in America, film critics tended to pick up on its authoritarian elements without labeling it outright fascism. Some excused the film by calling it a satire, a parable, or a fantasy. Others saw something redemptive in Hammond’s progressive agenda.<sup>37</sup> In Germany, however, its meaning was

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<sup>31</sup> “Metro optimistisch,” *Lichtbild-Bühne*, September 5, 1933.

<sup>32</sup> Economic and Trade Notes, 219, April 18, 1934, Department of Commerce, Record Group 151, National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>33</sup> Special Report 56, December 27, 1934; Special Report 82, February 25, 1935; Special Report 37, October 25, 1934, Department of Commerce.

<sup>34</sup> “Zwischen heute und morgen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 2, 1934.

<sup>35</sup> H. Brant, “Zwischen heut und morgen,” *Der Angriff*, March 1, 1934.

<sup>36</sup> Brant, “Zwischen heut und morgen.”

<sup>37</sup> Mordaunt Hall, “Gabriel over the White House”; Louella O. Parsons, “Walter Huston in Impressive Performance,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, April 7, 1933; “Flag Waves Smartly O’er ‘Gabriel in White

more straightforward. Yes, the film was a satire, but it was a *fascist* satire: it made fun of democracy and the inefficiency of the parliamentary system. And yes, President Hammond brought about positive changes, but these were no different from the ones the actual Führer was busy delivering. As the Nazis and MGM agreed, each of the film's main reforms – ending unemployment, solving the gangster problem, and bringing about world peace – ultimately served to validate the supremacy of Adolf Hitler.

The first reform in *Gabriel over the White House* fit most closely with actual events in Germany. Immediately upon taking office, Hitler declared that his priority was the “salvation of the German worker through an enormous and all-embracing attack on unemployment.” In 1933 he invested five billion Reichsmarks in work-creation schemes, and the results quickly started to show. Already in late April the Labor Minister Franz Seldte announced that the number of jobless had fallen by over 500,000. By 1934 unemployment had dropped to less than half the levels of the previous two years. While these figures didn't correspond exactly to reality, and the work-creation schemes were in fact an initiative of the previous government, there was still widespread belief that Hitler had brought about an “economic miracle.”<sup>38</sup>

*Gabriel over the White House* was released at just the right time to reinforce such attitudes. It showed a group of unemployed men converging in Baltimore to complain about their living conditions, and the Führer meeting them there to outline his plan of action. He gave a speech which summarized what Hearst had been saying in his editorials since the depression began: the government needed to create a large number of jobs in order to restore prosperity.<sup>39</sup> With no Congress to interfere, he invested four billion dollars in work-creation schemes, and soon the problem of unemployment was solved.

The film critic, H. Brant, was impressed, but he couldn't resist noting an important difference between the two situations. “All the things that have already been overcome in Germany, namely parliament, political parties, and the liberal business principle,” he wrote, “the American film can only wish for in a dream sequence.”<sup>40</sup>

That was true, but to be fair the American film also did something more: it “wished for” things that hadn't yet come to fruition in Germany. The Führer's job, after all, wasn't just to solve the unemployment problem; it was also to destroy an evil menace that threatened the very existence of the nation. Of course, the “evil menace” in Germany wasn't the same as the one in the United States. But the style of response was the same. *Gabriel over the White House* stigmatized one group as the source of all the nation's problems, and that was something to which German audiences could easily relate. In this case the villain was known as “the gangster.”

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House,” *Newsweek*, April 8, 1933; “A President after Hollywood's Heart,” *Literary Digest*, April 22, 1933; “‘Gabriel’ a Sensation,” *Hollywood Reporter*, March 2, 1933. The main exception was the review in *The Nation* entitled “Fascism over Hollywood,” April 26, 1933. For a fuller account of the reception of the picture in the United States, see Robert L. McConnell, “The Genesis and Ideology of *Gabriel over the White House*,” *Cinema Journal*, XV, 2, Spring 1976, 7-26. For a more recent analysis, see Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films*, New York University Press, New York, 1971, 110-120.

<sup>38</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, Penguin, New York, 2005, 328-36.

<sup>39</sup> See the Hearst editorial in the *New York American*, October 9, 1930, and the full text of his radio address, *New York American*, June 7, 1931.

<sup>40</sup> Brant, “Zwischen heute und morgen.”

Hollywood had already put out many gangster films. Just the previous month Cecil B. DeMille's *This Day and Age* had been a big hit in Germany.<sup>41</sup> It told the story of a group of schoolboys who united together, kidnapped the head gangster of their town, and lowered him into a pit full of rats. The film was banned in Holland because censors there felt it contained "strong fascist tendencies."<sup>42</sup> In Germany, on the other hand, Paramount renamed it *Revolution of Youth* (a title that could never have been used in America) and adopted a marketing campaign that fit the spirit of the times. It played for 20 days in its first run in Berlin.<sup>43</sup>

*Revolution of Youth* hardly proposed a concrete solution to the gangster problem, however. *Gabriel over the White House* did. Back in October 1932, Hearst commissioned Benito Mussolini to write an article on the subject, and it formed the basis for the film. Mussolini said there was just one answer to organized crime: "complete annihilation." Before the advent of fascism, the police in Italy were too timid to achieve this. Upon coming to power, he made sure to commission only those men who had the will, determination, and firmness to act without hesitation. "The real lofty democracy," Mussolini said, "is one which helps the people advance, protects and educates the masses, and punishes whenever necessary both wickedness and the wicked."<sup>44</sup>

That was just the position taken by *Gabriel over the White House*. No one could possibly say that the Führer hadn't issued his warning. In a speech over the radio he first outlined his plans for the protection of the American worker, and then ranted and raged against the enemy, "a malignant cancerous growth eating at the spiritual health of the American people." He continued, "These evil forces must be, shall be eliminated, so that our citizen pursuing his peaceful way will be no longer forced to conduct his business in the shadow of extortion and debt."

But the Führer was a generous man. A few days after speaking over the radio, he invited the head gangster, Nick Diamond, to the White House, and gave him the chance to return to his home country. When he refused, two very strong men were called in to escort him to his car. The gangster suddenly became frightened. "I thought I was guaranteed there'd be no frame-up," he said. The Führer looked up at a painting of George Washington on the wall, and smiled. "Diamond," he said in an example of fascist humor – that is, a moment when the film's assumptions were so taken for granted that it even attempted to make the viewer laugh – "I don't think you're quite ready for framing."

The following night, Diamond's men drove by the White House and shot at everyone inside. Luckily they failed in their assassination attempt, and only managed to wound Miss Malloy. That was when the Führer saw his chance. Knowing that his assistant, Mr. Beekman, had fallen in love with Malloy, and therefore had suffered an immense personal hurt, he hired him to eliminate all gangsters. It was a wise move, for Beekman acted swiftly and mercilessly. He summoned Diamond and his men to a court martial, and sentenced them all to death. "You're the last of the racketeers," he announced, "and why – because we have in the White House a man who has enabled us

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<sup>41</sup> *This Day and Age*, dir. Cecil B. DeMille, Paramount, 1933.

<sup>42</sup> PCA file for *This Day and Age*, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>43</sup> Economic and Trade Notes, 175, February 27, 1934, Department of Commerce.

<sup>44</sup> Benito Mussolini, "Highest-Placed Criminals Must Be Mercilessly Suppressed, Says Mussolini," *New York American*, October 23, 1932.



to cut the red tape of legal procedures and get back to first principles. An eye for an eye... a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.”

The course was clear. Beekman set up a concentration camp on Ellis Island in New York Harbor, where he personally supervised the shooting of the enemy. The President’s orders had been clear. “I want to exterminate them like rats,” he had said. Beekmen had no trouble doing his duty: “I had no regrets, no compunctions about the fate of the beasts of prey we had destroyed.”<sup>45</sup>

With the unemployment problem solved and the enemy completely eliminated, the Führer had one last thing to do. He organized a meeting with the most important leaders of the world, and bullied them with a display of American military power. “Is the President of the United States going to plunge the world into another war,” one statesman asked. “No, the United States must have the greatest navy in the world because we want peace,” he replied. When another statesman said that there needed to be further conferences, he answered that the Americans were always viciously exploited at such events. There was a much better solution. He forced every nation to sign a disarmament treaty which he himself had written, and with his work complete, he suffered a massive stroke and died.

For years the real Führer had conducted himself in a similar manner. He built much of his reputation by ranting about the “betrayal” of the Treaty of Versailles. He also understood the benefits of talking in terms of world peace. In an address to the Reichstag on May 17, 1933, he said that Germany was prepared to renounce weapons of aggression if other countries would do the same. Two years later, when that obviously hadn’t taken place, he created the new German army, saying he wanted nothing more than “the power, for the Reich, and thereby also for the whole of Europe, to be able to uphold peace.” In response to condemnation for his actions from the League of Nations, he gave yet another “peace” speech to the Reichstag. “What else could I ask for other than calm and peace?” he proclaimed. “Germany needs peace and wants peace.”<sup>46</sup>

Of course, maybe Hitler actually did want peace. It is unlikely, though, for he knew as well as anybody that such proclamations were the surest way to dominate other nations. So did Hammond. On the surface this American leader may not have seemed like a fascist because he didn’t glorify war. But in diplomatic situations, fascists never spoke in terms of war; they spoke in terms of peace. If anything, a film that showed the result of their words to be utter destruction would have undermined their very purpose. *Gabriel over the White House* was a perfect piece of fascism because it *lied*, and because everyone bought into the lie.

That went for every aspect of the film. In the case of the “unemployed,” audiences believed that Hammond’s top priority was to find everybody a job. In the case of the “gangsters,” they accepted the claim that the enemy was persecuting *them*. The film validated all of Hitler’s policies by perpetuating all of his lies. Even its title in Germany – *Between Today and Tomorrow* – promised that National Socialism would ultimately lead to utopia. The only thing missing was what Hitler would actually bring about – not total employment but hundreds of thousands off to war, not the weeding out of evil but genocide, not world peace but destruction on an unprecedented scale. The film claimed that an almighty leader could solve all of society’s problems at the same time as this idea

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<sup>45</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 175, 195.

<sup>46</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 492, 551, 555.

was enjoying its peak popularity in Germany. It spoke the lies of the Führer before they were revealed as lies. In short, it functioned as propaganda for the new regime.

Still, it would be a mistake to assert that *Gabriel over the White House* was a piece of propaganda simply *because* it lied. That would be to follow a common misunderstanding which equates all propaganda with duplicity and evil.<sup>47</sup> This film happened to reinforce Hitler's exact lies, but that wasn't the only thing that made it so convincing. Its success also lay in the particular way it was received in Germany.

As it turned out, the book's definition of propaganda was almost the same as Hitler's. Whenever Jud Hammond wanted to get his way, he turned to "his unfailing medium – the spoken word." Also like Hitler, he used new technological developments to replicate his oratorical abilities. He gave inspirational speeches which were broadcast to the public on their television sets at home or on "huge televisior screens" in the parks. In the film he used the less advanced medium of radio instead. It didn't matter; the effect was the same. As Tweed explained, "Countless citizens got the impression that they had been individually invited into the white House to receive from the President a private report on the state of the nation."<sup>48</sup>

Hammond also made a second use of propaganda. Early in his presidency, Nick Diamond's gangsters terrorized the unemployed men marching to Washington and assassinated their leader John Bronson. It gave him a brilliant idea. He instructed "one of the most important motion picture concerns in Hollywood to prepare a film based on the story of the... squatters," and even gave them actual instructions on how to depict the scene:

In the screen version Bronson was to have a highly melodramatic death with every adventitious aid to simulate sentimentality and patriotism... Every conceivable artifice of the film industry was to accentuate the viciousness of the gangsters... Before the symbolic Bronson finally fell dead, he was to wrap himself in Old Glory and call upon the President as the only saviour of the nation.<sup>49</sup>

In the film MGM released, of course, there could be no mention of Hammond doing business with Hollywood. (That went for the real President as well, for Roosevelt received no screen credit for his contribution.) But while this aspect of the plot was cut, something else remained: the above instructions of the fictional President determined almost exactly how MGM actually depicted Bronson's death. That is, the propaganda film envisioned in *Gabriel over the White House* the book was a part of *Gabriel over the White House* the movie.

It had a slightly different effect in each case. In the book, as Beekman pointed out, the film was a massive success and played at every theater in the country. While some denounced it as an incitement to public disorder, no one guessed that Hammond was behind it (just as no one imagined that Roosevelt was behind *Gabriel over the White House*). As it became more and more popular, it brought sympathy to the struggle of the unemployed protestors, and ultimately allowed the President to bring about the reforms

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<sup>47</sup> David Welch, "Introduction," in Welch, ed., *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations*, Barnes & Noble Books, Totowa, 1983, 2.

<sup>48</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 237, 81, 82.

<sup>49</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 73-4

he desired. But it wasn't perfect. Although technically proficient and decently acted, Beekman had to admit that it was nothing more than cheap propaganda – “the most horrible atrocity ever to be inflicted on the patient and docile American cinemagoer.”<sup>50</sup>

When *Gabriel over the White House* played in Germany, on the other hand, that wasn't the case at all. Certainly it helped Hitler's cause just as the fictional film helped Hammond's. As Brant pointed out, though, it wasn't cheap or tawdry in any way. “The danger of this film is that it risks turning into a boring set of debates,” he wrote. “Through a rapid use of editing, the powerful depiction of a great mind, and numerous engaging short scenes, Gregory La Cava has instead turned the film into an exemplary propagandistic artwork. From beginning to end it leaves the spectator completely breathless.”<sup>51</sup>

*Gabriel over the White House* was, in this critic's eyes, the perfect propaganda film. It showed the exact process by which Hitler became Führer. It explained the actual reforms he would soon bring about. And most important of all, it did it in a captivating, entertaining manner. In a regime that had only just come to power, and that was in the process of making propaganda central to its existence, Hollywood had supplied the first model picture. More were coming soon.

There were several reasons why American movies were so popular in Nazi Germany. One was their alleged technical superiority. Another was their vast array of stars. By far the most appealing aspect, though, was something deeply lacking in German productions of the time – their “light comedy touch.”<sup>52</sup> To cite a few examples from the press:

*After the Thin Man*: Just the right mixture of seriousness and fun, lightness and suspense, charm and brutality, to make the public erupt with laughter.<sup>53</sup>

*Forsaking All Others*: We are unable to make films like this, in which everything and nothing leads to silliness, attachments are formed as quickly as they are broken, and all with such understandable, lively, natural, easy-going dialogue.<sup>54</sup>

*Desire*: This is a new victory in American humor. It is the result of the Americans' open, uninhibited mentality.<sup>55</sup>

The films were so well received by audiences around the country that the German studios even started imitating their techniques.<sup>56</sup> “Virtually every week,” one newspaper

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<sup>50</sup> [Tweed,] *Gabriel over the White House*, 75-7, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Brant, “Zwischen heut und morgen.”

<sup>52</sup> “When discussing the film year 1935, even the German press had to admit that foreign films had by far the greatest artistic and economic success in Germany, and it has repeatedly been regretted that the German film industry is unable to attain the light comedy touch which is so characteristic of the American feature film.” Special Report 62, January 22, 1936, Department of Commerce.

<sup>53</sup> “Eleganz mit Scharfsinn,” *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 20, 1938.

<sup>54</sup> “Ein Herz zu verschenken,” *Der Film*, August 3, 1935.

<sup>55</sup> “Sehnsucht,” *Film-Kurier*, April 3, 1936.

<sup>56</sup> Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz. Der Amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Trier, 1999, 149-157; Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996, 99-123.

reported, “our production managers ask the American companies to borrow copies of their films so that they can learn from them.”<sup>57</sup>

From Hitler’s perspective, none of this had anything to do with the concept of propaganda. While he certainly found many Hollywood movies very funny, he didn’t ever think that humor could be used to persuade the masses. Indeed, he always felt that propaganda should avoid any kind of artistic endeavor, for the moment it strayed from its primary purpose it became useless. “I want to exploit film fully as an instrument of propaganda,” he once said, “but in such a way that every viewer knows that today he’s going to see a propaganda film. Just as in the Sportspalast he doesn’t expect to hear politics mixed with art. It makes me sick when I see political propaganda hiding under the guise of art. Let it be either art or politics.”<sup>58</sup> Hitler’s theory derived from his experience as an orator, and it was no coincidence that it led to the creation of *Triumph of the Will*, which played for 29 days in April 1935.<sup>59</sup> Still, as impressive as that film was, it also revealed the limits of his imagination. He knew as well as anybody that there was no point putting out a sequel to such a film. It was a dead-end for future production.

But Hitler’s theory of propaganda wasn’t the only one in Nazi Germany. Joseph Goebbels also watched movies every night, and the opinions he recorded of them revealed a much more open-minded attitude. After enjoying Frank Capra’s Oscar-winning comedy *It Happened One Night*, he wrote “An American film from which we can learn a lot. The Americans are far superior to us. The German film *Leicht Kavalliere* proves that. Bored to death.”<sup>60</sup> Very similar was his reaction to the second most popular movie in Germany in 1937. “*San Francisco* with Clark Gable and Janet MacDonald. Wonderfully acted, directed, and produced. *Stärker als Paragraphen*, a German botch containing a National Socialist message. Absolutely atrocious.”<sup>61</sup>

Goebbels eventually came up with an alternative theory to Hitler’s, one which placed great value on entertaining the masses. As his diary entries revealed, he infinitely preferred a good comedy to a bad piece of propaganda. Such films, he thought, provided the nation with “the edification, diversion, and relaxation needed to see it through the drama of everyday life.”<sup>62</sup> That wasn’t the whole story, though. If a propaganda film were to be successful, it too needed to be enjoyable: “Even entertainment can be politically of special value, because the moment a person becomes conscious of propaganda, propaganda becomes ineffective. However, as soon as propaganda as a tendency, as a characteristic, as an attitude, remains in the background and becomes apparent through human beings, then propaganda becomes effective in every respect.”<sup>63</sup> It was just what Brant had said about *Gabriel over the White House*: the film worked because it used human drama to sustain the audience’s attention at every moment. Far from getting in the way of propaganda, this was just what made it succeed.

At the end of 1935, an excellent year for the American companies, Goebbels gave a speech in which he took this observation even further. He criticized the way German

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<sup>57</sup> “Filmwirtschaftliche Außenpolitik,” *Essener Nationalzeitung*, January 3, 1935.

<sup>58</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 1983, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Special Report 106, May 22, 1935, Department of Commerce.

<sup>60</sup> Angela Hermann et al., eds, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH, Munich, 2005, 3, I, October 17, 1935, 312-3.

<sup>61</sup> Hermann et al., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, 3, II, August 23, 1936, 165.

<sup>62</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 38.

actors read lines in an overblown way as if they were performing at the theater. Film was its own art, he said, and was subject to its own laws. It worked best when it tried to capture real life. Only the Americans had truly understood this. In films like *It Happened One Night* and *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, they acted in a way that was unforced and completely convincing. Then he made a fascinating observation. “A hero,” he said, “doesn’t always need to speak heroically in order to be heroic.”<sup>64</sup> In those words he not only revealed how much he had thought about the two American films he had mentioned, but also hinted at what Nazi propaganda should look like.

*It Happened One Night* was the most successful film in Germany in 1935, playing 56 days in its first run in Berlin.<sup>65</sup> It told the story of a spoilt millionaire’s daughter, played by Claudette Colbert, who ran away from her father and met an out-of-work reporter, played by Clark Gable. The unlikely pair fought throughout their travels, but ended up falling in love, and in a way that deeply impressed Goebbels. It wasn’t just that their interaction was a delight from start to finish and amazingly true-to-life. It was the way they ended up together. Late in the film Gable tried to declare his love for Colbert, but in a moment of misunderstanding she returned angry and heartbroken to her father. Then Gable met with the father to collect the money he had spent on her, and now he was the angry one. The father wrote Gable a check and looked at him curiously.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question, frankly,” he asked. “Do you love my daughter?”

Gable was calm now that he had his check. “Any guy that’d fall in love with your daughter ought to have his head examined,” he answered.

“Now that’s an evasion,” the father said.

Gable was getting agitated again. “What she needs is a guy that’ll take a sock at her once a day whether it’s coming to her or not,” he yelled. “If you had half the brain you’re supposed to have, you’d have done it yourself long ago.”

“Do you love her?”

“A normal guy couldn’t live under the same roof as her without going nutty! She’s my idea of nothing!”

“I asked you a simple question,” the father yelled back. “Do you love her?”

“YES. BUT DON’T HOLD THAT AGAINST ME, I’M A LITTLE SCREWY MYSELF!”

And so the couple fell neatly into each other’s arms, but hardly in the normal way. Gable never got the chance to declare his undying love for Colbert. Instead he yelled it at her father. “A hero,” in other words, “doesn’t always need to speak heroically in order to be heroic.”

*It Happened One Night* was a romantic comedy with no obvious political message, so the stakes in this case weren’t so high. Paramount’s *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* was another story altogether.<sup>66</sup> It too was extremely successful – the third most popular film of the year, playing 43 days in its first run in Berlin.<sup>67</sup> Unlike *It Happened*

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<sup>64</sup> “Dr. Goebbels vor den Filmschaffenden. Ein neues Bekenntnis zum Film,” *Lichtbild-Bühne*, December 16, 1935.

<sup>65</sup> *It Happened One Night*, dir. Frank Capra, Columbia, 1934; Special Report 55, December 23, 1935, Department of Commerce.

<sup>66</sup> *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, dir. Henry Hathaway, Paramount, 1935.

<sup>67</sup> Special Report 106, May 22, 1935, Department of Commerce.

*One Night*, however, it was regarded as a *Tendenzfilm*, that is, a picture exhibiting “strong National Socialist tendencies.”

Perhaps its biggest draw lay in the fact that it starred Gary Cooper. He played Lieutenant Alan McGregor, a brave but headstrong member of the Bengal Lancers – the section of the British army dedicated to preserving the peace in colonial India. The film made him one of Germany’s favorite actors, and the romance didn’t end there. In November 1938, two weeks after the Nazis launched their horrific pogroms on the Jews on “Crystal Night,” he would repay the favor by making a publicity trip to Germany.<sup>68</sup> It was an appropriate gesture. In *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* he had taught the German public two crucial lessons they wouldn’t soon forget.

That was no metaphor. Soon after the premiere of the film, the government not only found it “artistically valuable” (an honor which exempted it from a variety of taxes), but also deemed it useful for “national education.”<sup>69</sup> According to Nazi philosophy, that meant it could be used to indoctrinate the young.<sup>70</sup> When the Hitler Youth began projecting films for its members later in the year, it was one of the first to be shown. “The practical importance of these performances,” an American trade commissioner explained, “lies in the fact that in Berlin alone 20 to 30 000 young people see these films and, if the younger children are included, as many as 60,000 persons.”<sup>71</sup> The Nazi leaders always made sure to start out the meetings with some of the regular Party propaganda. The main attraction, however, went as follows.

Lieutenant Alan McGregor was dissatisfied. He had joined the army to get some action, but the head of his regiment, Colonel Stone, always insisted on withholding fire even upon being attacked. When this incomprehensible policy led to the death of two fellow lancers, a curious situation arose. One of the replacements was Lieutenant Forsythe, an accomplished soldier from another regiment. The other was Donald Stone, a recruit straight out of military college, and the Colonel’s own son. McGregor looked on in disbelief as the Colonel treated his son like any other soldier, and at a certain point he couldn’t stand it anymore. He took the boy aside and told him that the Colonel had no human feelings. “What’s a son to him compared to his blasted regiment,” he yelled, but just as quickly he apologized for the outburst and told him to forget it.

Then one day McGregor and Forsythe discovered that Stone Jr. had been kidnapped by Mohammed Khan, the Colonel’s arch enemy. It was obviously the boy’s fault, for he had left the campsite against orders. Even so, McGregor was horrified to learn that the Colonel didn’t intend to send out a detachment for his son. “I’d just begun to think I was wrong about you, but I wasn’t,” McGregor yelled. “You haven’t a human bone in your body, there’s not a drop of blood in your veins!” When he was done yelling, the Colonel arrested him for insubordination and placed him under the charge of Forsythe. It hardly came as a surprise. Giving orders was the only thing the old man knew how to do.

It was time for the film’s first lesson. Major Hamilton, the Colonel’s loyal assistant and the most inexpressive man in the regiment, came storming in to McGregor’s

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<sup>68</sup> Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 217; Anthony Slide, “Hollywood’s Fascist Follies,” *Film Comment*, 27, 4, July-August 1991, 62-7.

<sup>69</sup> Zensurlisten, Deutsches Institut für Filmkunde, Frankfurt.

<sup>70</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 18.

<sup>71</sup> Special Report 101, May 26, 1936, Department of Commerce.

quarters. He was furious. How could McGregor possibly think that the Colonel didn't care about his son? Of course he cared. His son meant everything in the world to him.

"I suppose if it were your son you'd sit here too like a dummy," McGregor said. "You would not."

"No, I should probably have ordered the regiment out," the Major replied. "But that's because I'm not the man the Colonel is. Nor the soldier."

"Well if that's what you call being a man or a soldier then I don't want any part of it," McGregor yelled defiantly.

"Man you are blind!" the Major yelled back. "Have you never thought how for generation after generation here, a handful of men have ordered the lives of 300 million people?" (Or, as Paramount changed it for the German version, "how a handful of white men have protected 300 million Indians from chaos?")<sup>72</sup> "It's because he's here, and a few like him. Men of his breed have made British India. Men who put their jobs above everything. He wouldn't let death move him from it and he won't let love move him from it. When his breed of man dies out, that's the end. And it's a better breed of man than any of us will ever make."

The film was preaching an idea that was in common circulation in Germany: according to common doctrine the Führer too had given everything up for his people. He was the loneliest man in the country because he carried its entire weight on his shoulders. As Goebbels once put it, "He stands alone facing his and our fate in order to battle out to a victorious conclusion the titanic struggle imposed on us for the life of our nation."<sup>73</sup>

But that was just the regular propaganda. There was something about this film, in Goebbels' opinion, that made it more effective than any of his own proclamations. It had to do with how Colonel Stone didn't need to speak heroically in order to be heroic. When he tried talking to his son, his words were awkward. When his son was kidnapped, he didn't say anything at all. Like Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, he completely avoided drawing attention to his feelings. For over an hour the Hitler Youth wondered why this man was acting so coldly towards his son, and then, because he would never say it himself, his loyal friend revealed the truth. The film was using a clever dramatic technique to sustain their attention and thereby lead them through any doubts they had about serving their own leader, Adolf Hitler.

"A hero doesn't always need to speak heroically in order to be heroic": the phrase may even have been a subtle attack on a propaganda film released at precisely the same time, *Triumph of the Will*, in which the hero's words were always received with the greatest applause. That, Goebbels may have been saying, perhaps wasn't the best way to propagate the Führer principle through film. Whatever the case, the phrase certainly had a second meaning. In addition to the way Clark Gable didn't reveal his feelings for Claudette Colbert, Goebbels had been struck by something else about the film: it was funny. In his famous observation, he was making the point that a character could be heroic even when he was constantly joking around. Once again that idea didn't have serious consequences in *It Happened One Night*, but in the case of *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* it took on propagandistic potential.

The character of Forsythe was crucial in this respect. Played by Franchot Tone, the President's secretary in *Gabriel over the White House*, he never missed a chance to

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<sup>72</sup> "Angelsächsische Kameradschaft," *Der Angriff*, February 22, 1935.

<sup>73</sup> Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 149.

make a witty remark as the story unfolded. He took particular pleasure in teasing his superior McGregor at every opportunity. At the beginning of the film, when McGregor took pity on the Colonel's son, he made fun of his "mother instinct." A few days later he drew the joke out even further, playing an awful sounding bagpipe and justifying it by saying, "Like you I have a softer side to my nature." The reviewer from the *Berliner Tageblatt* continued describing the scene:

The cheeky Forsythe is brought to reason in a masterly way. He is driving his superior mad by playing a creaky bagpipe. Just then a cobra misinterprets the noise, thinking that the Scottish atonalities are actually the call of a local snake charmer. Now the cobra dances in front of Forsythe's nose, and he is sweating like a pig until his superior shoots it, barely concealing the ironic smile on his face as he does so.

In this reviewer's opinion, the cobra scene revealed the secret behind the entire picture. On the one hand, its danger reminded the viewer of the predicament in which the boys constantly found themselves. On the other, its comedy made their behavior seem very human and entirely believable. "We are stirred and moved to see that bravery can exist at the same time as fear," he wrote, "but at every moment, even in the utmost crisis, humanity is there as well."<sup>74</sup>

That was especially the case after Major Hamilton gave his climactic speech about Colonel Stone. As soon as he left, Forsythe couldn't resist commenting on the highly unusual outburst.

"There's a great deal of speaking of minds going on here tonight," he said. "I didn't think the old boy had it in him – *but he's right.*"

Forsythe was trying to make one of his typical comments, but it came out serious, and the cheekiness of the impulse only added to the gravity of the conclusion. Even McGregor was starting to see that the "old boy" had a point. It didn't matter, he said stubbornly; he was going after the Colonel's son anyway. Once again Forsythe displayed both wit and courage in his response: since McGregor was his prisoner, he could hardly let him out of his sight, so he would have to go as well.

It was an extremely dangerous expedition. The two men were dressed in ridiculous disguises, and Forsythe was singing about "Mother McGregor" until McGregor threw mud in his face. Somehow they were admitted into Mohammad Khan's stronghold at Mogala, but they were of course identified in no time, and the next thing they knew they were fighting Mohammad Khan's guards to get away. At the peak of the action the film suddenly cut; now they were sitting down to a civilized dinner with Khan himself, and Forsythe was complimenting him on the mutton. The villain said he was willing to free them if they simply said where their regiment intended to pick up its next munitions supply. "Well," Forsythe quipped, "when then furry little animal jumped out of the bag, he really jumped, didn't he?" Then, after telling Khan what he really thought of the mutton (it was "rotten"), the comedic part of the experience ended and the serious part began.

Khan had an original way of making his victims speak: he placed tiny bamboo slivers under their fingernails and lit them. Neither McGregor nor Forsythe gave anything away, but the Colonel's son did, and the next day Khan had enough ammunition to wipe

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<sup>74</sup> "Bengali," *Berliner Tageblatt*, February 22, 1935.



out the entire forty-first regiment. As the reviewer for the *Berliner Tageblatt* noted, even at this point the soldiers didn't entirely lose their sense of humor: "Forsythe movingly sings a song about England in his moment of greatest depression, only to regret the lack of violin accompaniment."<sup>75</sup> It was just then that McGregor and Forsythe came up with a plan. One would sacrifice his life by blowing up the entire munitions supply, and the other would provide cover. They betted on who would do the main job, and Forsythe "won." At the last minute, however, McGregor punched Forsythe in the face and did the deed himself. In his final words, he said that Stone Jr. should repay him by never telling his father that he had given in under torture. Not only was he sacrificing himself for the leader he had once doubted, but he was protecting the old man from the knowledge of his son's betrayal.

That was the second lesson of *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*: young people should give up their lives for their leader who had already given up so much for them. As Goebbels' newspaper *Der Angriff* pointed out, they should do it without asking questions: "These men say nothing about the issues of the nation with which they are confronted. They have obviously understood it for themselves. Perhaps it would offend them if someone started to talk about it."<sup>76</sup> Yet despite the seriousness of this message, humor was used at every point to support it, and far from detracting from the power of the film it only made it more convincing. The emotion of the final scene – the tears that Stone Jr. held back as the Victoria Cross was pinned on McGregor's horse – was all the more profound because of the humor that had come before it. It was no coincidence that the film was screened to members of the Hitler Youth for "educational" purposes. It put them in the position of boys only slightly older than themselves, who joked around like themselves, and then led them through the appropriate learning process.

Goebbels wasn't the only Nazi to notice that the Americans had provided the most successful propaganda film to date. Many others picked up on it as well, and they didn't hesitate to point it out. Gerd Eckert, a leader in the Hitler Youth, complained that there were nowhere near enough such films, and that the few in existence were unconvincing and full of clichés. "It is shameful," he wrote, "that our filmmakers lack the courage to make a movie like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*."<sup>77</sup> And Leonhard Fürst, a leader in the German Film Chamber, described the terrible state of the local industry and asked, "Where can we find a script like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*?"<sup>78</sup>

It was nothing less than a challenge: someone in Germany needed to produce a film that contained a National Socialist message and was funny as well. In 1936, such a film did appear, and it turned out to be the second biggest hit of the year – but once again it was made in Hollywood.

The stakes were even higher this time. *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* had been a massive success, but it didn't actually deal with contemporary political issues. In this respect it was consistent with most Nazi propaganda films on the Führer principle: apart from *Triumph of the Will*, these all harkened back to important historical figures. With the appearance of *Gabriel over the White House*, however, the Americans had set a precedent for a different type of film, one which attacked democracy as the cause of the

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<sup>75</sup> "Bengali," *Berliner Tageblatt*.

<sup>76</sup> "Angelsächsische Kameradschaft," *Der Angriff*, February 22, 1935.

<sup>77</sup> Gerd Eckert, "Filmtendenz und Tendenzfilm," *Wille und Macht*, February 15, 1936.

<sup>78</sup> Leonhard Fürst, "Der deutsche Filmstil," *Jahrbuch der Reichsfilmkammer*, 1937.

current crisis and proposed fascism as the only possible solution. Their next contribution would continue this tradition. It was called *Our Daily Bread*, and it made quite an impression when it premiered in Berlin on August 5, 1936.<sup>79</sup>

A group of men were sitting around a campfire listening to someone named John Simms outline his plan. Alone they were unemployed and helpless, he was saying, but if they combined their skills they could turn the abandoned farm on which they were sitting into a productive community. The men responded with enthusiasm. One offered to donate his sack of potatoes to the common pot, so Simms put him in charge of supplies. Another said he would contribute his twenty dollars, so he became head of finances. Just then a third figure in the crowd, a pudgy looking gentleman with a funny voice and a funny hat, felt an urgent need to speak.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, trying to sound as official as possible, "what form of government are we going to have?"

Simms was stumped. He obviously hadn't thought ahead this far. "Well," he replied, rubbing his head and trying to think, "whatever most of the crowd wants."

"Then I suggest, my friends, that we bind ourselves together in sacred covenant, and establish an immortal democracy!"

The crowd responded instantly with a loud murmur of disapproval. "It was that kind of talk that got us here in the first place," one man yelled, and everyone laughed in agreement.

Then someone made a second suggestion. "We must have a socialistic form of government," this man said seriously. "The government must control everything, including the profits."

A few people seemed interested in this suggestion, but ultimately the crowd was dissatisfied. That was when Chris Lansen, a dispossessed Swedish farmer and the first to join Simms in the venture, suddenly stood up. "Vait a minute," he yelled. "Let me talk! I don't even know what those words mean them fellers been talkin'! All I know is, we got a big yob here, and we need a big boss! And Yohn Simms is feller for boss!"

Everyone went wild in approval. Even the man who had originally proposed a democracy was excited. "Simms for boss!" he announced, and as he called for three cheers, Simms looked mighty pleased with himself.

A journalist for *Der Angriff* left the theater feeling deeply impressed by what he had just seen. "These men don't need to discuss much because discussion was the cause of all their problems," he wrote in his review the following day. "The first man who was there should give orders and lead. And that's that!"<sup>80</sup>

While this reviewer came away with just the right interpretation of the scene, *Our Daily Bread* has long been misunderstood by American critics. Its maker, King Vidor, has been as responsible for this as anyone else. According to his account, when the United States was in the throes of its worst ever economic depression, Hollywood only wanted to show riches and glamour. "But," he added, "I didn't wanna be a complete prostitute as far as making money in the studios was concerned. I didn't feel like being the good company boy."<sup>81</sup> Upon discovering that unemployed white-collar workers were returning to the land to form cooperative farms, he was inspired to write a screenplay on

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<sup>79</sup> *Our Daily Bread*, dir. King Vidor, Viking/United Artists, 1934.

<sup>80</sup> "Die neuen Wunder," *Der Angriff*, August 7, 1936.

<sup>81</sup> *A Prelude to "Our Daily Bread"*, dir. David Shepherd, 1983.

their plight. Even though he didn't want to prostitute himself he went to the major studios with his story, and when they rejected it he "returned to the land" himself. He mortgaged his house, his car, and "everything that looked valuable" in his safe-deposit box, and made the picture independently. It did fairly well at the box office, and it won a prize in Moscow as well as a League of Nations award "for its contribution to humanity."<sup>82</sup>

Vidor left a few things out of his account, however. Although he did mention that he went to his friend Charlie Chaplin for help, he didn't explain what this meant for the picture. Chaplin was one of the owners of United Artists, and in providing distribution he was guaranteeing that it would be viewed all around the country. As a result, Vidor would almost certainly make his money back while being praised by most newspapers for his courage in depicting the plight of ordinary people.<sup>83</sup> Vidor also left out something that was even more important. He mentioned that the film won international prizes, but conveniently forgot to say that it was deemed "artistically valuable" in Nazi Germany and played for 54 days in its first run in Berlin, far longer than in any other city in the world.<sup>84</sup>

There was a reason for the film's disproportionate success in Germany. Viewers there understood Vidor's sensibility better than anyone else because it jibed so closely with their own. "The author and director has a very strong attitude and always tries to propagate the Führer principle," the *Völkischer Beobachter* reported.<sup>85</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* agreed, and added that "the Americans have the advantage over us of being able to depict such things with humor (as in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer!*)."<sup>86</sup>

The point was almost turning into a cliché. Hollywood was putting out film after film that promoted Nazi ideology in an entertaining way. As at least one critic pointed out, at the opposite extreme lay *Triumph of the Will*.<sup>87</sup> In a key scene of that film, the men of the Reich Labor Service had told Hitler about their daily routines. Some planted trees; others built roads; still others provided farmers with soil. In reply, Hitler gave a speech on how much he valued their efforts. The film was making an important ideological point: it was portraying the Führer as the figure around whom the very concept of work was organized. The fact that the men were standing in perfect formation in front of him seemed to enforce this point. He glared at them with a gigantic frown the entire time, and in return none of them so much as cracked a smile.<sup>88</sup>

*Our Daily Bread* enacted a more amusing version of the same scene. "The appeal to community here is no empty phrase," *Der Angriff* reported. "It is deep and humorous."<sup>89</sup> It started with John Simms advertising for help, and dozens of men instantly arriving on his property. "Wow," he said under his breath; just the previous day

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<sup>82</sup> King Vidor, *A Tree is a Tree*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1952, 220-8.

<sup>83</sup> Andre Sennwald, "Kind Vidor and 'Our Daily Bread': His Fine Drama of a Cooperative Farm is the Achievement of a Cooperative Mind," *New York Times*, October 7, 1934. Once again, *The Nation* was the exception, calling the film "a travesty." "Collectivism More or Less," *The Nation*, June 24, 1934. For a more recent analysis, see Bergman, *We're in the Money*, 71-82.

<sup>84</sup> Zensurlisten, Deutsches Institut für Filmkunde, Frankfurt; Special Report 49, December 1936, Department of Commerce.

<sup>85</sup> "Der Letzte Alarm," *Völkischer Beobachter*, August 5, 1936.

<sup>86</sup> "Der Letzte Alarm," *Berliner Tageblatt*, August 6, 1936.

<sup>87</sup> "Amerikanische Filme," *Die Tat*, vol. 28, 1936, 153.

<sup>88</sup> *Triumph of the Will*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl, Leni Riefenstahl-Produktion/Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, 1935.

<sup>89</sup> "Die neuen Wunder," *Der Angriff*, August 7, 1936.

he had confused carrots for weeds, and now he was going to lead a gigantic venture in farming. “Line up men!” he yelled as authoritatively as he could, and to his surprise they did exactly as he said. There was a plumber, a carpenter, and a stonemason, but he didn’t know what to do when he got to the concert violinist. The man begged him for work, saying he had strong wrists and would use them in the fields, so Simms patted him on the back and told him not to go away. Then he got to the next man in line, an undertaker, and the poor leader rubbed his head and wondered how to be optimistic about that.

Later that night he had regained his composure. Like Hitler, he had to inspire the men with a speech, and he knew exactly what to say. He started with a few jokes about Indians to warm up the crowd, and then, barely able to conceal his excitement, he told them “You don’t have to stay – you can go whenever you want to – but if you do stay, make up your minds to *work!*” The next thing he knew, he was leading the men to the fields, and the process of plowing the land had begun. In no time at all the first seeds would start to sprout.

Like *Triumph of the Will*, this film was envisioning an ideal community united by work and headed by a leader. Indeed it could have been called *Triumph of the Will* – as long as one prefaced it as the American version, containing (in the *Volkischer Beobachter*’s words) “a whole variety of American characters.”<sup>90</sup> There were Swedes and Italians, there were Yankees and Westerners; there was even a wanted criminal called Louie. None of this raised any problem for the Germans, who only saw it as evidence that the National Socialist ideal was catching on even in democratic America.<sup>91</sup> They only made a single change. Among the cast of characters was a very little man, a certain Mr. Cohen, who spoke with a peculiar accent and whose business was high-class pants pressing. He set up a shop in the middle of the community and put up a sign announcing that he would “swap or sell anything.” When he was done he rubbed his hands together and waited for the first customer to arrive. In the German version, “Mr. Cohen” became “Mr. Brown.”<sup>92</sup>

And yet while this offensive aspect of the plot was cut, its specter remained. The ideal community in the film shared an important similarity to the one in the audience: it would tolerate absolutely no threat to its internal stability. When the men were picking out their plots of land, one tried to bully another and kick him off his space. Just then the criminal Louie – a character devised by Chaplin – made his appearance. He was bigger than the bully so he punched him in the face and knocked him to the ground. “There ain’t no place in this camp for your kind of guy,” he said threateningly. “We’re gonna have law and order here – we’re gonna have it if I have to clean up half the outfit.” A few weeks later another situation arose: the farm was put up for public auction. Once again Louie took action. He brought a piece of rope to the proceedings and showed it to the other bidders to indicate what would happen if they tried to buy the property. Louie’s actions were funny in the same way as Hammond’s threats to the gangster in *Gabriel over the White House* were funny: they were based on the assumption that it was a good thing to protect the community from a vicious enemy.

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<sup>90</sup> “Der Letzte Alarm,” *Volkischer Beobachter*, August 5, 1936.

<sup>91</sup> Ernst Hugo Correll, “Was bleibt der Autor dem deutschen Film schuldig?” *Jahrbuch der Reichsfilmkammer*, 1937, 115.

<sup>92</sup> Zensurkarte, Filmprüfstelle, *Der Letzte Alarm*, Prüf Nr. 43672, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin.

There was an important difference, however. John Simms had absolutely no idea that Louie was forced to stoop to these measures. He was too much of a good guy to suspect that anyone ever meant to do him any harm. When he saw how the men had saved his farm he just laughed and told them how wonderful they all were. A subtle change had been taking place over the course of these films: the leader was becoming more and more human. On the one hand, this made him a much more appealing figure. On the other, it was just these qualities that almost led to the undoing of the entire community.

Up to this point, the Nazis had expressed great ambivalence towards films that combined the issue of leadership with that of eroticism. When the reviewer for *Der Angriff* saw *Queen Christina*, the second most popular picture in Germany in 1934, he came away thinking that women should never be put in positions of power. After going through the plot – Christina had abandoned the throne of Sweden to run away with the man she loved – he simply concluded, “One woman describes all women.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, the one thing the *Volkischer Beobachter* objected to in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* was how Stone Jr. was lured away from his regiment’s campsite by Mohammad Khan’s beautiful female accomplice. “When you come across such an exceptionally written screenplay as this one,” the reviewer suggested to Paramount, “take a red pen and gently cross out the parts that aren’t quite so good.”<sup>94</sup> In the case of *Our Daily Bread*, however, none of the Nazi reviewers had anything negative to say about the struggle that John Simms waged between his official duty and his sexual desire. On the contrary, they regarded it as an excellent example of an ordinary leader learning the value of sacrifice.<sup>95</sup>

A beautiful blonde had joined the community under suspicious circumstances, and as the days went by Simms seemed to be spending an increasing amount of time with her. She had a way of making him feel better about himself, and he welcomed it because everyone else was blaming him for the drought that was going on. One day he tried complaining to his wife, but what she told him wasn’t quite as comforting.

“They look up to you John,” she said. “They want to believe in you – they picked you as their leader.”

“Well who asked them to pick me,” he replied. “I can make mistakes too, can’t I? I’m only human. Can I help it if it don’t rain?”

“No one expects you to,” she said. “But keep your perspective. Be the boss again. Let them think you’re not worried. Let them think you know more than they do.”

Her advice didn’t help. The blonde had convinced him that he was destined for better things, and one night they ran off together. As they were driving away, he was plagued by images of Louie telling him not to go. The criminal had turned himself in to the authorities so the community could obtain the reward for his capture. Suddenly Simms started to understand the immensity of that sacrifice. He pulled over to the side of the road; he couldn’t drive and think about Louie at the same time. Just then he heard the sound of a nearby stream, and he came up with an idea. What if the men dug a massive ditch from the stream to the crops, he wondered? Wouldn’t that solve all their problems? The blonde held his neck tightly and told him not to go (fig. 3), but he pushed her away and ran back to the farm.

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<sup>93</sup> “Greta Garbo. Eine Frau zeigt alle Frauen,” *Der Angriff*, October 25, 1934.

<sup>94</sup> “Bengali,” *Volkischer Beobachter*, February 23, 1935.

<sup>95</sup> “Der Letzte Alarm,” *Volkischer Beobachter*, August 5, 1936.

It was time to give the speech of his life. The men all hated him by now, and he needed to convince them to work harder than ever. As Hitler had said, the point of the spoken word was “to lift people out of a previous conviction, blow by blow to shatter the foundation of their previous opinions,” and that was just what Simms did.<sup>96</sup> He yelled with all the emotion he could muster – only unlike Hitler he was genuinely on the verge of tears. Then he did something that was an exact copy of the orator’s technique in *All Quiet on the Western Front*: he turned to one member of the crowd, his old friend Chris Lansen, and asked him what he was going to do. “I go get my shovel Yohn,” Chris replied. “If you go,” someone else said, “then I’m going too.”<sup>97</sup> Soon everyone had agreed to do the job, and after hours of grueling work the men had succeeded in saving the farm.

The Nazis responded to *Our Daily Bread* with unqualified praise. From their perspective, by turning the leader into an ordinary guy, the film validated the Führer principle more effectively than ever before. In reality Hitler himself was not so different from John Simms: he would agonize for days before making decisions. When he did decide, however, it was with great firmness, as if to suggest that the course of action were inevitable.<sup>98</sup> He never imagined that it might be fruitful to expose the public to his human fallibility. *Gabriel over the White House* perpetuated the mystery in the same way, claiming that Hammond was doing the will of God, and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* only briefly hinted at the difficulties Colonel Stone was experiencing. *Our Daily Bread* finally introduced a leader with whom audiences could identify, someone they could feel was just like them, someone in whom they could completely trust. The Nazis had been praising Hollywood films for a while, but this development prompted a director in the German Film Chamber, Ernst Hugo Correll, to write a report on what the Americans had achieved. It turned out to be nothing less than a manifesto.

*Our Daily Bread*, Correll said, was so striking that it seemed to have been made under the direct instructions of the Propaganda Ministry. Indeed, if it were a German production it would undoubtedly have won the state prize. This was a shameful state of affairs, and what made it even worse was that there were more American films just like it. Only recently Columbia had released *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, another picture in which the leader was an ordinary guy. Mr. Deeds, played by Gary Cooper, inherited a massive fortune, and when he learned that politicians were leaving respectable farmers to starve he gave it to them instead. “In this film as well,” Correll wrote, “a National Socialist idea is inserted – incidentally in a very amusing way.”<sup>99</sup>

It was no coincidence that Correll had seized on *Mr. Deeds* as the next film in the tradition. Along with Frank Capra’s two other “social problem” pictures, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, it suggested that a single man could solve all of society’s problems in one fell swoop.<sup>100</sup> These films were only the most sophisticated

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<sup>96</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1943 [1925 and 1927], 466.

<sup>97</sup> *All Quiet on the Western Front*, dir. Lewis Milestone, Universal, 1930.

<sup>98</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler*, 162, 344.

<sup>99</sup> Correll, “Was bleibt der Autor dem deutschen Film schuldig?” *Mr. Deeds* was not screened in Germany because of a technicality in the censorship process.

<sup>100</sup> David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2002, 132-4; Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin, “What’s the Matter with Capra?: *Sullivan’s Travels* and the Popular

version of a legacy first established by *Gabriel over the White House*. Beekman had described President Hammond as follows: “The things he says make so much sense they seem crazy.” Six years later, Mr. Smith said almost the same thing about himself: “Either I’m dead right or I’m crazy.”<sup>101</sup> In both cases the leader was supposedly pointing out something so obvious that corrupt politicians wanted it to seem like lunacy. In this world view it would take one courageous man to restore order and sanity to a broken society. Correll explained just why this message was so appealing: “We don’t disapprove of films because they contain something unusual. On the contrary, we are seeking the unusual, because we know from experience that it contains a risk which can lead to the greatest success.”<sup>102</sup>

Correll had been sidetracked in giving his glowing review of *Mr. Deeds*, however, so he got back to the point. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “I cannot spare our German writers from this reproach: they have not yet managed to express National Socialist ideas in the relaxed, lively way that we see in the examples I have just given. Our German writers have been able to express National Socialist ideas in film ... but they have not yet found the freedom to shape their work in the way I have described. Naturally we will continue making films about our own history, for that is certainly a way to express a National Socialist message. But if we could find a way to create something entirely new, like *Our Daily Bread*, that would considerably expand our propagandistic abilities.”<sup>103</sup>

Correll’s dream never came true. In the remaining years of the Third Reich, no German director put out a propaganda film that its audience fell in love with. The Americans, on the other hand, did. The very next month MGM released its all-star production *Mutiny on the Bounty* which, like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, showed how an ordinary man could rise up against the tyranny of a corrupt power. It played for 42 days in its first run in Berlin, and the reviewer for *Der Angriff* was ecstatic.<sup>104</sup> “We take this film to be the most powerful American production in recent years,” he wrote, “and would like to say that even *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* pales in comparison.”<sup>105</sup> The *Berliner Tageblatt* added, “Don’t forget the laughs, which occur at the most serious moments (and which make the picture lighter, more enjoyable, yet no less serious).”<sup>106</sup>

The Nazis were so impressed with Hollywood’s output of propaganda pictures that on a few occasions they even sent filmmakers and journalists on trips to Los Angeles. One visitor, Ernst Jäger from the *Film-Kurier*, observed how the moguls ruled the studios with an iron fist, and came up with the following hypothesis: “The secret of MGM is that it is built on the Führer principle.” His visit to the Warner Brothers lot a few

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Front,” *Representations*, 71, Summer 2000, 106-34; Michael P. Rogin and Kathleen Moran, “Mr. Capra Goes to Washington,” *Representations*, 84, 2004, 213-48.

<sup>101</sup> *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, dir. Frank Capra, Columbia, 1939.

<sup>102</sup> Correll, “Was bleibt der Autor dem deutschen Film schuldig?”

<sup>103</sup> Correll, “Was bleibt der Autor dem deutschen Film schuldig?”

<sup>104</sup> *Mutiny on the Bounty*, dir. Frank Lloyd, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1935; Special Report 49, December 1936, Department of Commerce.

<sup>105</sup> “Die Kameradschaft der Seefahrer,” *Der Angriff*, September 10, 1936.

<sup>106</sup> “Meuterei auf der Bounty,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, September 10, 1936.

days later only confirmed this impression: the smaller studio, he said, was “organized like Prussian army barracks.”<sup>107</sup>

This may have been related or it may have not. Whatever the case, the Nazis saw something in Hollywood films which they could not do themselves. A reviewer from a regional Party paper perhaps captured the paradox better than anybody else. He came out of *Our Daily Bread* thinking exactly what H. Brant had thought of *Gabriel over the White House*: the film raised issues that had already found their great solution in Germany. A week later he felt compelled to write a second review, and this time he added the following: “This film could just as easily have been made in Germany.”<sup>108</sup>

But was this really the case? Since fascism had already been realized in Germany, it may no longer have been possible to come up with satisfying fantasies about the leader principle. In Hollywood, on the other hand, such fantasies were still commonplace. Is it possible that what some Germans might have thought of as a fascist imagination was more readily available in a democracy?

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<sup>107</sup> “Herbst in Hollywood II: Größtes Atelierreich der Welt,” *Film-Kurier*, November 12, 1935; “Herbst in Hollywood III: Viel Licht – also auch viel Schatten,” *Film-Kurier*, November 16, 1935. Also see Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, Anchor Books, New York, 1988.

<sup>108</sup> “Amerikanische Filme von uns gesehen,” December 3, 1936, *Oldenburgische Staatszeitung*; “Neues amerikanisches Filmschaffen,” December 10, 1936, *Oldenburgische Staatszeitung*.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### “Bad”

*“Nobody has courage enough to act without the other fellow.”*<sup>1</sup>

Hitler devised three categories for movies – “good,” “bad,” and “switched off” – and the “bad” category is by far the most difficult to write about. This difficulty goes all the way back to a distinction Hitler made in *Mein Kampf*. In a society fighting for its existence, Hitler said, propaganda acquires supreme importance, and entertainment loses all its value.<sup>2</sup> While “good” and “switched off” were propagandistic categories – “good” referring to pro-Nazi movies and “switched off” referring to anti-Nazi movies – the “bad” category referred to everything else, and in Hitler’s estimation at least, “everything else” was innocuous.

Nevertheless regular movies played a bigger part in Nazi Germany than Hitler imagined, even though he himself spent virtually every night watching them. The censors argued about what movies should be permitted; the American companies did everything they could to appease the censors; and occasionally American movies had unintended consequences that directly contradicted the official propaganda of the Third Reich.

The current chapter turns to these censorship difficulties. It is not concerned with the particular movies that Hitler deemed “bad” in this period. Nor does it focus on the negative reviews that American movies received in the press. Rather, the chapter draws on censorship reports from the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv and the Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt to examine the movies that caused serious controversy in Germany – and these were always the ones that starred Jewish actors. The American studios argued back and forth with the Germans about this issue, and ended up collaborating with the authorities in surprising ways. On the other hand, the Propaganda Ministry’s instructions to the press (held today at the Bundesarchiv-Koblenz) reveal that sometimes the Germans could be the ones doing the collaborating.

Dr. Ernst Seeger had passed judgment on so many Hollywood movies that he had worked out a whole routine. He would explain in the minutest detail the intentions behind the film law of 1920 – he knew what they were, for he had written it himself – and then he would approve the movie in question, expressing confusion as to why it had been brought to his attention in the first place.<sup>3</sup> His approach trickled down to the lower censorship authorities as well. In 1931, only two of fifty-six Hollywood movies were

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<sup>1</sup> “Hitlerized Show Biz,” *Variety*, June 19, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1943 [1925 and 1927], 177-8. “When the nations on this planet fight for existence – when the question of destiny, ‘to be or not to be,’ cries out for a solution – then all considerations of humanitarianism or aesthetics crumble into nothingness; for all these concepts do not float about in the ether, they arise from man’s imagination and are bound up with man... When people try to approach these questions with drivel about aesthetics, etc., really only one answer is possible: when the destiny and existence of a people are at stake, all obligation towards beauty ceases... And since these criteria of humanitarianism and beauty must be eliminated from the struggle, they are also inapplicable to propaganda.”

<sup>3</sup> See his various censorship reports on Hollywood films at the Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt.

banned in Germany.<sup>4</sup> In 1932, only three of sixty-eight.<sup>5</sup> It was all very convenient – but it was starting to change.

Ever since Seeger headed the committee that banned *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Hitler and Goebbels had kept their eye on him. There was something about this man that appealed to them, and it led to a peculiar decision. On March 13, 1933, the day the Propaganda Ministry was created, they put him in charge of the Film Department. He was the only non-Party man to be granted such a distinction, and he should have been the American studios' best ally in Germany, but it didn't work out that way. George Canty, a commercial attaché representing the studios in Berlin, couldn't stand Dr. Seeger. He called him "the stiffest man we have to contend with here," and wished that one of his "sufficiently flexible Nazi assistants" would take his place: "He is the former chief censor, and as a stickler for details is just too impossible."<sup>6</sup>

It turned out that Canty was wrong about one detail. Seeger wasn't the "former chief censor." He was still the chief censor. Only when he resumed his duties, there was another problem. It wasn't that the film law had changed, for he still only disapproved of films if they "endangered public order; harmed religious feelings; provoked a threatening or immoral effect; or endangered the German image or Germany's relations with other nations."<sup>7</sup> It wasn't that his manner had changed either, for he continued to explain exactly why he had worded the law in this way. Still, he was an entirely different man from before.

The companies had recently submitted some pictures to the lower censorship board, expecting them all to be approved without any complications. To their surprise, three were instantly rejected: a drama entitled *The Last Parade*; a comedy called *Trouble in Paradise*; and *By Whose Hand*, a thriller. In accordance with the film law, the companies appealed the decisions in a timely manner, knowing that as a result they would reach Seeger's board for review. At the meetings, though, he was as unresponsive towards them as he had once been towards their opponents. Only a few months earlier he had permitted pictures just like these, but now he turned down all three appeals. He said that the films glorified criminal life, and therefore "provoked a threatening or immoral effect." He seized on the most trivial aspects of the plots and spoke like a guardian of morality when previously he would have scoffed at such things. In fact, he resembled his former self in only one way: sensing, perhaps, that he was doing the Americans an injustice by changing his approach so suddenly, he waived the costs of the appeals.<sup>8</sup>

Then one day he stopped waiving them.<sup>9</sup>

And soon after that, he gave a judgment which was more worrying than all the others put together. *Blonde Venus* was a melodrama starring Marlene Dietrich and directed by Josef von Sternberg, both German émigrés living in Hollywood.<sup>10</sup> The picture had played for 35 days just before the Nazis came to power, but Goebbels' newspaper

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<sup>4</sup> Censorship Lists, 1931, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>5</sup> Censorship Lists, 1932, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>6</sup> G. R. Canty, "Weekly Report," 47, May 20, 1933, 2, Commerce Department, Record Group 151, National Archives, College Park.

<sup>7</sup> *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1920, 953.

<sup>8</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6353, March 3, 1933, Deutsches Filminstitut Frankfurt; Oberprüfstelle report 6392, March 11, 1933.

<sup>9</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6577, April 22, 1933.

<sup>10</sup> *Blonde Venus*, dir. Josef von Sternberg, Paramount, 1932.

*Der Angriff* had hated it. The reviewer raged at the way Sternberg and Dietrich were squandering their talent in America, and on the fourth of July the Bavarian authorities appealed it to the supreme censorship board.<sup>11</sup>

Following normal procedure, the offensive picture was screened at the beginning of the meeting, and Seeger and the others sat through it. They saw a cheap woman called Helen Faraday have an affair with a wealthy man, Nick Townsend, and then run away with her son after her husband discovered her reprehensible deed.<sup>12</sup>

In his judgment, Seeger lashed out against the film in a particularly harsh way. “Despite the veiling of the interaction between Helen and Townsend,” he said, “there is absolutely no doubt that the couple is engaging in extramarital relations. Helen receives money from Townsend, moves into one of his apartments, and undertakes a long pleasure trip with him while her husband is in Germany. She acts like a prostitute, and as her further destiny shows, she in fact becomes one when she runs away. The fact that Helen takes her son with her, and allows him to witness her degradation, proves that the sentimental ‘mother love’ depicted at the end of the picture is not genuine. Similarly, the mother’s ‘inner suffering’ is in no way believable, and therefore cannot be considered a redeeming factor.

“Such a lax depiction of marriage and morality,” he concluded, “contradicts the nation’s current emphasis on the importance of the family.”<sup>13</sup>

The significance of that final comment wasn’t lost on the committee. Although Seeger was officially banning *Blonde Venus* because of its “immoral effect,” he was also pointing out that it contradicted the principles of National Socialism. He had never done anything like that before.

Early the following year, Goebbels offered Seeger another important assignment: he wanted him to update the film law of 1920. There was an extremely important case coming up for appeal, and it would be good if the new law were in place when it reached the censorship board. Seeger was only too willing to oblige, and after weeks of work the job was done. In addition to the four previous reasons, a film could now be banned if it “endangered the vital interests of the state,” or if it “harmed National Socialist, ethical, or artistic feelings.”<sup>14</sup> There was also one more notable change. Seeger cut a sentence of the old law which had read, “Permission must not be denied for reasons that lie outside the content of the film.”<sup>15</sup> On March 1, 1934, the new law came into effect, and the following day a film came up for appeal. It was *Tarzan, the Ape Man*.

When the MGM representative walked into the meeting that day, he was probably thinking that something very suspicious was going on. Only a few months earlier Paramount had appealed a film which was virtually a remake of *Tarzan*, and Seeger had permitted it with only a few minor cuts. “There is no reason to go beyond these changes,” he had said, “because the Americans have now released so many versions of *Tarzan* that an immoral effect can no longer be expected from these improbable events.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Canty, “Economic and Trade Notes,” 161, January 16, 1933, Commerce Department.

<sup>12</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6759, July 4, 1933, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6759, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1934, 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Reichsgesetzblatt*, 1920, 953.

<sup>16</sup> *King of the Jungle*, dir. Max Marcin, Paramount, 1933; Oberprüfstelle report 6866, August 3, 1933, 5.

What made the situation even stranger was that the MGM representative didn't really care whether *Tarzan* was banned or not. The film had premiered nearly a year and a half before, and by this stage it was playing only occasionally at minor theatres in Germany and bringing in negligible proceeds.<sup>17</sup> Yet just at this point in time a Württemberg minister had appealed it. The MGM representative certainly wasn't going to miss the meeting, but he wasn't going to ask anyone to come and assist him either.

As usual, the proceedings began with a screening of the film, followed by a summary of the plot. "Jane Parker is the daughter of an ivory merchant in Africa," Seeger said. "She accompanies him on an expedition to an animal cemetery, where they hope to find vast quantities of ivory. On the way there she discovers Tarzan, the ape man, who has been raised by apes and has never seen a human being. Tarzan kidnaps Jane but soon he is her best friend; she tries to make him understand her language. Tarzan then rescues Jane and her father from a group of dwarfs, but when the small expedition finds the elephant cemetery, Jane's father dies. Jane remains with Tarzan in the jungle."<sup>18</sup>

It was a generous summary, for everyone in the room knew that Tarzan and Jane were more than "best friends." Even the most conservative officials understood what was going on when Jane looked at Tarzan's massive hand and said, "Yes, my hand is a lot smaller than yours. Do you like that difference?" Tarzan didn't reply, of course, because he couldn't, but the answer was clear. He liked it.<sup>19</sup> And now, after reading out his report, Seeger was looking over at the Württemberg minister and asking him why he was objecting to the film. What followed wasn't exactly a repeat of Professor Zeiss's outburst at the *King Kong* case, but it came close.

"This film is one of those Africa pictures that awakens the sadistic instincts of the spectator by deliberately emphasizing the struggle between humans and animals, as well as that between animals of different kinds," the minister said. "It is immoral and threatening because it shows the public how a nice little monkey lets out atrocious death screams as it tries to run away from a roaring tiger, while the tiger laughs and even squeals in pleasure as it chases him. Just as bad is the herd of elephants trampling a black village, and one of the elephants throwing a dwarf into a massive hole, where the unfortunate soul wriggles in pitiful death convulsions and screams as he perishes.

"The cruelty to animals that occurred in the making of this picture is a cultural disgrace, and it could never take place in the new Germany because of the animal protection law we have instituted. The film law should leave no stone unturned in preventing foreign pictures of this type from reaching the screen in Germany, for the producers of these films are breaking the fundamental rules of humanity in their pure search for profit."<sup>20</sup>

When the Württemberg minister had finished talking, Seeger did a strange thing. Usually his next move would be to ask the MGM representative to respond, but instead he announced that he had found it necessary to consult the Propaganda Ministry on whether the film harmed German racial feelings. Conveniently he was a member of the Ministry himself, so it had been relatively easy to find someone to give an expert opinion. The official, Dr. Thomalla, had put down his views in writing, and Seeger now proceeded

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<sup>17</sup> Canty, "Economic and Trade Notes," 176, February 16, 1933, Commerce Department.

<sup>18</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7192, March 2, 1934, 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Tarzan, the Ape Man*, dir. W. S. Van Dyke, MGM, 1932.

<sup>20</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7192, 3-4.

to read them out. Everyone in the room knew that this would be the final testimony of the day.<sup>21</sup>

“Because the people’s consciousness has been heightened by a month-long intensive propaganda campaign on all questions of genetic biology,” he read, “this film must be considered dangerous. The Nazi state has been tirelessly trying to awaken a sense of responsibility in the public so that they adopt the highest standards in their selection of a mate. It has also put a great deal of effort into freeing the ideas of marriage, womanhood, and motherhood from the superficial distortion of the past epoch which was completely aimed at sexuality. A film that puts pure sexuality in the foreground, that claims that a jungle man, virtually an ape, is capable of the noblest soul impulses and is a worthy marriage partner, certainly runs against the political tendencies of National Socialism.

“The film must be rejected,” the letter concluded, “for it contradicts the fundamental ideas of National Socialism and the official propaganda, even if the impartial spectator doesn’t immediately recognize it.”<sup>22</sup>

That was enough for Seeger. He said that the Government had put a great deal of effort into keeping alive the healthy racial feelings of the German people, and that it contradicted these efforts to show a civilized woman court, love, and protect a jungle man. There was nothing left to discuss. Since the film had already been banned from further circulation in the German Reich, the committee could refuse to assess the position of the Württemberg minister.<sup>23</sup>

It was a landmark case. For the first time since Hitler took power, a film was officially banned because it “harmed National Socialist feelings.” Never again would such images be shown in Nazi Germany. And yet despite the forcefulness of the Propaganda Ministry’s verdict, a strange aftertaste remained. There had been no obvious Nazi consensus on *Tarzan*. The Württemberg minister had made his argument no less forcefully than the Propaganda Ministry, but it wasn’t even taken into consideration. If the Nazis themselves couldn’t agree on why a film “harmed National Socialist feelings,” then how could the American studios be expected to know? *King Kong* was merely ridiculous and *Tarzan* was deeply offensive, but how could such things be predicted in advance?<sup>24</sup> Over the next year or so, several American films reached the same censorship board, and the companies paid a lot of attention to the results.<sup>25</sup>

A Laurel and Hardy movie called *The Bohemian Girl* was rejected because its depiction of gypsies had no place in the Third Reich.<sup>26</sup>

A Marlene Dietrich picture called *Song of Songs* was banned because once again this German actress was indulging in her preference for prostitute roles.<sup>27</sup>

A science fiction comedy called *Just Imagine* was so absurd and artistically injurious that it would embarrass the American people to screen it in Germany.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7192, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7192, 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7192, 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6910, October 5, 1933.

<sup>25</sup> Canty, “Economic and Trade Note,” 158, January 25, 1934, Commerce Department.

<sup>26</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7819, June 13, 1936, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7270, March 14, 1934, 2. Not even her \$500 donation to the National Socialist film fund helped overturn the decision. See Douglass Miller, “German Film Notes,” Special Report 89, April 26, 1934, 4.

A hospital drama called *Men in White* was unable to get through because it undermined the Nazis' vision for a new generation of German doctors.<sup>29</sup>

For some reason Dr. Thomalla from the Propaganda Ministry was invited to that last meeting, and to everyone's surprise he actually came. He said the problem with the film was that the American hospital resembled a gigantic factory. It would be frightening and alarming for German spectators to see patients stamped with a number, wrestling with death in an enormous building, while people in the adjoining rooms didn't seem to care.<sup>30</sup>

And so after several cases it really wasn't becoming any clearer to the American studios just which pictures stood a chance of being accepted. Each decision was more confusing than the last. But if the Americans were even trying to understand them at this point, they needn't have bothered, for a dramatic series of events was about to unfold which would change the Nazis' whole approach to censorship in Germany.

It actually started with a British picture, *Catherine the Great*. Since there was nothing objectionable about its content, it easily passed the meeting of the board of censors early in 1934. Then, a few days after its premiere was announced, Goebbels issued a public statement: if any Jewish artists had fled the country after the Nazi takeover, they should never again be permitted to appear on the German stage. "It would not do that the German public would have to resort to self-defense against people of whom it thought it was happily rid," he said. By a strange coincidence, the star of *Catherine the Great* was Elisabeth Bergner, a Jew who until a year earlier had been one of Germany's leading actors.<sup>31</sup>

On the day of the premiere, a large crowd had gathered outside the Capitol Theater in Berlin. When the audience emerged from the first screening there was no serious disturbance, but the police then pushed everyone back in anticipation of diplomatic personnel who were about to arrive. "We don't want Jewish pictures!" the crowd yelled, and a significant number revealed themselves as SA men in uniform. As the diplomats entered the theater, the crowd started throwing eggs and rotten oranges. These were meant for the advertising posters, but as one commentator explained, "in several instances marksmanship was poor and fur coats were the victims." The Italian ambassador was hit. At that moment a prominent Nazi leader gave a speech, the uniforms suddenly disappeared, and the police were able to disperse the crowd.<sup>32</sup>

The following morning the President of the Film Chamber announced that *Catherine the Great* was being taken out of circulation in Germany. It was obvious that the film "endangered public order." Douglass Miller, the acting American commercial attaché in Berlin, was skeptical. "It is clear that such danger can be supplied readily at a moment's notice," he wrote.<sup>33</sup> The American ambassador went even further in his report to the Secretary of State. He suggested that the censors had deliberately approved the film to make it seem as if "public opinion" were responsible for the ultimate decision.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7398, July 27, 1934, 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7381, July 11, 1934, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7381, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, "Economic and Trade Notes," 186, March 10, 1934, 1, 3, Commerce Department.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, "Economic and Trade Notes," 186, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, "Economic and Trade Notes," 186, 2.

<sup>34</sup> J. C. White to Secretary of State, March 15, 1934, 4, State Department, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park.

It was no coincidence that the American authorities were paying such close attention to the case. They were worried that they were next. The head of MGM in Germany, Fritz Strengolt, had just learned of a similar objection to one of his pictures, *The Prizefighter and the Lady*. He had submitted the picture to the lower censorship board back in January, and it was approved instantly. Since it promised to do very well at the box office, he spent \$25,000 to have it dubbed into German, expecting the approval of the new version to be a mere formality. Instead he received a shock. He was told this time round that the censorship board intended to ask the Propaganda Ministry about the fact that the film starred the famous Jewish boxer, Max Baer. It was a bad omen, for the premiere of the approved version was set to take place the following evening – one week after that of *Catherine the Great*, in exactly the same theater, and in the presence of the foreign press.<sup>35</sup>

Strengolt was a hard-headed man, and he tended to stand up for his rights. He knew that the Propaganda Ministry would take the opinion of the Foreign Office into consideration, so he immediately wrote to his contacts there. After stating the obvious – Max Baer had defeated Max Schmeling a year earlier, and was about to face another German boxer, Walter Neusel, in America – he explained the severe consequences that would result from the banning of *Prizefighter and the Lady* in Germany.<sup>36</sup>

First, MGM would give up its Berlin office, for it was not in the habit of conducting business in this way. As a result, around 160 employees would lose their jobs, and the German company that manufactured MGM's film prints would lose its biggest customer.

Second, MGM was 100 per cent owned by Loew's Incorporated, and a very considerable portion of Loew's was in the possession of William Randolph Hearst, who controlled the biggest media empire in the United States. Up to this point the Hearst press had adopted an anti-French tone, and had treated the new regime in Germany with objectivity and good favor.

Third, if *Prizefighter and the Lady* were banned, there would automatically be massive reprisals against German films and German sportsmen in America. Up to this point, MGM had been anxious to cultivate good relations between the two nations. It had helped secure distribution deals for German pictures. It had made *Gabriel over the White House*, which the German government officially recognized as "politically valuable." If the premiere of the Max Baer film didn't go ahead as planned, the news would be grim not just for MGM but also for the new Germany.<sup>37</sup>

Strengolt didn't leave it at that. He had another connection to the Foreign Office as well: one of his employees was the nephew of the German Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath.<sup>38</sup> He told the young man to speak with his uncle about the case,

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<sup>35</sup> "Reich Bans American Film Because Max Baer is a Jew: 'The Prizefighter and the Lady' Halted by Goebbels after Successful Run; U.S. Reprisals Indicated," *Paris Herald Tribune*, March 29, 1934; Strengolt to Foreign Office, March 15, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, R 80310, Politisches Archiv, German Foreign Office, Berlin.

<sup>36</sup> Strengolt to Foreign Office, March 15, 1934.

<sup>37</sup> Strengolt to Foreign Office, March 15, 1934.

<sup>38</sup> Cauty, "Confidential Memorandum to Mr. White, Chargé D'Affaires," January 26, 1935, Commerce Department.

and at eleven thirty the next morning the Foreign Minister was on the phone with Dr. Goebbels.<sup>39</sup>

As it happened, the recipient of Strengholt's letter, Dr. Führ, was in the room just when von Neurath made the call. Although Führ could only hear what one of the parties was saying, he left behind a record of the exchange. "Baron von Neurath stressed that the English version was feely approved in January, and that a sudden belated ban would have such bad consequences, and would be such an insult to the organizers and the foreign press that the matter would be known throughout the entire world within two hours," he noted. "In reply to this statement, Reichsminister Goebbels said something which I didn't hear. From the further words of the Foreign Minister, however, it became clear that Reichsminister Goebbels had agreed to go ahead with the premiere, and that he would provide protection against any potential disturbance... He also emphasized that if the film company didn't freely withdraw the picture the next day, it would be banned."<sup>40</sup>

The Foreign Minister hung up the phone and called Führ over to his desk. He asked him to pass on the news to his nephew, which Führ did immediately.<sup>41</sup>

At around two p.m. Führ met with Dr. Seeger, who seemed more concerned about the matter than anyone else. The chief censor had no qualms with the picture, but he was worried that Goebbels' guarantee of no violence couldn't be upheld. He said that the police would hold him personally responsible if any "Jewish pictures" created a public disturbance. Führ replied that he would contact the police himself and instruct them to take the necessary precautions.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Führ called Strengholt to inform him of the results of his efforts. He reassured the MGM manager that he had spoken not only to the police but also to the local Party leader, and that the evening's events would run smoothly. That said, the Film Chamber would undoubtedly issue a ban the next day, and the wisest move for MGM (and one involving no loss of prestige) would be to withdraw the picture first thing in the morning. Führ then demonstrated his excellent command of the English language by saying that the most he could obtain for the company was this brief "respite."<sup>43</sup>

Strengholt wasn't impressed. He asked for the reason behind the decision and Führ said he believed it had something to do with an insulting remark that Baer had made about the Führer. On June 8, 1933, the American boxer had sewed a Star of David onto his trunks and left glove for his fight against Max Schmeling. After knocking him out in the tenth round, he told the press, "Every punch in the eye I give Schmeling is one for Adolf Hitler."<sup>44</sup>

None of these allegations came as a surprise to Strengholt, who had done his research. He directed Führ's attention to an article in the morning edition of *Der Angriff*, and he proceeded to read it out over the phone:

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<sup>39</sup> Führ, "Aufzeichnung," April 5, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>40</sup> Führ, "Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.," March 16, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda; Führ, "Aufzeichnung," April 5, 1934.

<sup>41</sup> Führ, "Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.," March 16, 1934.

<sup>42</sup> Führ, "Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.," March 16, 1934.

<sup>43</sup> Führ, "Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.," March 16, 1934.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph C. Nichols, "The Fight by Rounds," *New York Times*, June 9, 1933; "Nazis Still Irked by Baer's Remark; Public Wants to See Champion Whose Gibe at Hitler Embarrasses Officials," *New York Times*, March 14, 1935; Führ, "Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.," March 16, 1934.



Max Schmeling speaks with respect about his former opponent. He stresses that up to his return to Europe, they were the best of friends. Why, then, this stupid claim that Baer said he would crush “the representative of Hitler”? Schmeling never heard anything like this when he was in America. It was only in Germany that a certain press put out such reports. That press wanted to convince us that the National Socialist regime was unbearable to foreign nations. We know exactly who had an interest in promoting that point of view.<sup>45</sup>

If Goebbels’ own newspaper was categorically denying the rumor about Baer, Strengtholt said, then what was the problem? Führ replied that this lay outside his area of expertise, but that MGM could always provide any documentation to the Film Chamber at a later date. For the moment, though, the only course of action was to withdraw the film from circulation.<sup>46</sup>

Führ’s efforts had the desired effect: the premiere of *Prizefighter and the Lady* went ahead without any interruption. The only unusual occurrences were the audience’s applause (tumultuous) and the critics’ response (jubilant). The reviewer for *Der Angriff* was H. Brant, the same man who had written the review of *Gabriel over the White House* a couple of months earlier. He congratulated W. S. Van Dyke for his excellent direction, and Myrna Loy and Walter Huston for their superb acting. (Huston, he reminded his readers, had played the astounding role of the President in *Gabriel over the White House*.) He reserved his highest praise, however, for Max Baer, who played the leading role. Baer gave a marvelous performance as a boxer who rapidly rose to stardom, even if he did have a few adulterous affairs on the side. This man was always a winner – whether as a boxer or as an actor, whether he put his efforts into chasing women or simply allowing himself to be surrounded by them.<sup>47</sup>

Funnily enough, one of the only complaints about the film was that it hadn’t been dubbed into German yet. “Why,” the reviewer for the *Völkischer Beobachter* asked, “instead of dubbing the picture, must the company resort to this careless procedure of printing German titles under the English dialogue, which is spoken at such an agonizingly fast tempo that the spectators’ eyes must work half the time just to keep up with what is going on? In the future, please use either the German language or nothing at all!”<sup>48</sup>

Strengtholt read all the reviews, and the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s critique may have been what convinced him to continue with his application for the dubbed version. He was certainly encouraged when the Film Chamber didn’t pull the English version out of circulation as Goebbels had threatened. It was in its fifteenth consecutive day of sold-out showings on the morning that the lower censorship board met to pass judgment on the case.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Gegen unsinnige Gerüchte-macherei. Zur heutigen Uraufführung des Max-Baer-Films,” *Der Angriff*, March 16, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> Führ, “Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.,” March 16, 1934.

<sup>47</sup> “H. Brant, “Männer um eine Frau,” *Der Angriff*, March 19, 1934. Also see “Männer um eine Frau. Capitol am Zoo,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, March 17, 1934; “Männer um eine Frau. Im Capitol,” March 17, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>48</sup> “Männer um eine Frau,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 18/19, 1934.

<sup>49</sup> Miller, “German Film Notes,” Special Report 89, April 26, 1934, 1, Commerce Department; Führ, “Aufzeichnung zu dem Schreiben der Metro-Goldwyn Mayer A.G.,” March 16, 1934.

The meeting opened with the first-ever screening of *Prizefighter and the Lady* in German. When it came to an end, the head of the committee, Arnold Bacmeister, turned to the only invited guest, Dr. Ziegler from the Propaganda Ministry. “Do you object to the showing of this picture because it is not in the spirit of the new Germany,” he asked, “given that the main actor is the Jewish boxer Max Baer?”

“Yes,” Ziegler replied.

With that, Bacmeister thanked the representative for his time and dismissed him.<sup>50</sup> The discussion commenced. Everyone agreed that the events of the film revolved completely around Max Baer, and Bacmeister even pointed out that the title in Germany, *Men around a Woman*, would be more accurate if it were reversed: *Women around a Man*. Furthermore, this wasn’t just any man. It was one who had all the internal and external features of a Jew. The German public would inevitably recognize him as a typical representative of his race.<sup>51</sup>

It was bad enough, Bacmeister said, that the main character of the film was a Jew. The decisive point, however, was that despite his inherent moral defects, he was portrayed as a sports hero and moral victor. His victory took place not only in the ring but also outside it – with non-Jewish women. He grabbed them indiscriminately and slept with them, and his non-Jewish wife was so addicted to him that she forgave him every time. Such a portrayal could no longer be tolerated in the new Germany. Bacmeister therefore banned both versions of *Prizefighter and the Lady* and ordered that the print currently playing at the Capitol be taken out of circulation immediately.<sup>52</sup>

Strengtholt was outraged. He called a press conference that same afternoon and announced to fifty journalists that *Prizefighter and the Lady* had been banned because its main actor was a Jew. His company stood to lose 350,000 marks as a result. If the Nazis intended to ban all pictures containing non-Aryans, he said, then not only MGM but all the American studios would be forced to leave the country. In that case, around 5,000 local employees would lose their jobs. His studio had already lodged an appeal with the highest censorship board in the country, and the others would be paying close attention to the outcome.<sup>53</sup>

It was a threatening statement, and it had quite an effect. The state secretary, who couldn’t believe his ears, called MGM to ask whether the movie had really been banned. He then made inquiries to the Propaganda Ministry, where he was told that Foreign Minister von Neurath had agreed with the decision in a telephone conversation with Dr. Goebbels. By this stage the Reich Ministry of Economics was getting involved as well. One particularly alarmed representative paid a visit to von Neurath, and finding him away on Easter vacation, met with F  hr to explain that the Foreign Office was now being held partially responsible for the ban.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Film A.G., Untitled Memorandum, March 29, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>51</sup> “Entscheidungsgr  nde f  r das Verbot der   ffentlichen Vorf  hrung des Films ‘M  nner um eine Frau,’” March 29, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>52</sup> “Entscheidungsgr  nde,” March 29, 1934.

<sup>53</sup> “Aufzeichnung betr. Verbot eines amerikanischen Films,” March 30, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>54</sup> F  hr, “Aufzeichnung,” April 5, 1934; “Aktenvermerk,” April 6, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda; Dieckhoff to Posse, April 7, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda; F  hr, Untitled Memorandum, April 7, 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

A few days later, von Neurath wrote a concerned letter to Dr. Goebbels. He reminded him of what he had actually said in their telephone conversation, and then stated his position in no uncertain terms:

In view of the extraordinary influence that the American film industry exerts on our economy, we will have to deal with a detrimental reaction from Washington if the lower censorship board's decision is upheld. The Americans think of film not as a cultural asset but as a commodity, and the former ambassador emphasized a few years ago that it is one of their most significant exports. From this perspective, the uncertainty generated by the censors' decision will cast serious doubt on our reliability as a commercial partner.

After reiterating the basis of MGM's claim – *Prizefighter and the Lady* was originally permitted, and that decision led the company to have the picture dubbed at a considerable expense – the Foreign Minister urgently requested that Goebbels intervene in the upcoming meeting of the supreme censorship board.<sup>55</sup>

The second screening of *Prizefighter and the Lady* took place two weeks later, and this time it was in front of Dr. Seeger's committee. The representative for MGM had several objections to the earlier decision. He first pointed out that, as everyone had just seen, the boxing match at the end of the picture between Max Baer and Primo Carnera resulted not in a victory but in a tie. Therefore *Prizefighter and the Lady* didn't glorify Baer or make him seem superior to other people. And even if it did, German audiences would never think of Baer as a "typical representative of his race." They would consider him merely an exception.<sup>56</sup>

Seeger refuted both of these claims. "The entire film is an apotheosis for Max Baer, whose life serves as its principal content, and whose fight against Primo Carnera puts all the sympathy of the public onto his side," he said. "Furthermore, this committee believes that Baer is a particularly Negroid type of Jew. When the company claims that the German public would not consider Baer to be a 'typical representative of his race,' it remains alone in this view."<sup>57</sup>

The MGM representative moved on. Bacmeister had said that Baer's "superiority" led him to have sexual relations with non-Jewish women. The representative countered that German feelings were only hurt when relations between Jews and non-Jews took place in *Germany*. Since the film was set in America, it wasn't offensive in any way.<sup>58</sup>

"Relations between Jews and non-Jews are offensive to German feelings regardless of where they are set," Seeger replied. "Furthermore, Jews must never play the leading roles in films screened in Germany. In this matter it makes no difference whether the Jew is German or of another nationality, or whether the film is set in Germany or abroad."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Von Neurath to Goebbels, April 1934, Politische und kulturelle Propaganda.

<sup>56</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7324, April 21, 1934, 1, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7324, 6, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7324, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7324, 6, 5.

MGM had one last objection. Even if the authorities insisted on banning the dubbed version of the film, they had no basis for pulling the original version out of circulation as well.

“The inclusion of the original English version in the ban is not to be criticized,” Seeger said. “It is explained by the fact that in the time between the presentation of the original version and the dubbed German version, the new film law became effective, which forbids pictures which harm National Socialist feelings.”<sup>60</sup>

It seemed to be a clear, forceful decision. Jews could never play the leading roles in films screened in Nazi Germany. Yet MGM didn’t leave the country as a result, and years later, when the War was over, Arnold Bacmeister wrote a memoir in which he explained why. “Of particular significance,” he wrote, “was the question of whether and to what extent the participation of Jewish artists in a film justified a ban on account of ‘harming National Socialist feelings.’ When the American film *Prizefighter and the Lady* was submitted to the board, with the Jewish boxer Max Baer in the leading role, I took the position that the mere participation of a Jewish artist did not justify a ban. A film should only be rejected if the artist were playing a leading role or were well known to the German public. This restrictive interpretation seemed necessary to me out of practical considerations. If the interpretation had been any broader, barely a single foreign film could have been shown in Germany.”<sup>61</sup>

In the first year of the Third Reich, Seeger and his men put a lot of effort into working out a system of censorship based on content. When an early thriller reached the board, they set a precedent for banning horror movies. When *The Last Parade* and *Trouble in Paradise* came up for review, they announced their intention to reject anything glorifying criminal life. And with the passing of the new film law, they worked out some more eccentric reasons for turning down various kinds of motion pictures.

None of this was unique to Germany. Throughout the 1930s the Hollywood studios experienced tremendous difficulties with censorship boards all around the world. Since foreign markets accounted for around forty per cent of their gross annual income, they had no choice but to pay attention to the whims of all nations – and unfortunately these varied immensely. Britain prohibited religious scenes; Quebec wouldn’t allow actors to say the word “divorce”; and Japan formulated a policy to exclude all pictures which (1) reflected badly upon royalty, (2) could be considered derogatory to the military, and (3) contained kissing scenes.<sup>62</sup>

Germany was simply joining in with these established practices. It had previously permitted *Frankenstein*, but suddenly it rejected *The Invisible Man* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.<sup>63</sup> It gave the same reason as other northern European nations for the decisions: these horror movies created an immoral craving for sensation which would lead to the endangering of public order.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7324, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold Bacmeister, *Bedeutung und Arbeitsweise der Filmprüfstelle in Berlin. Ein Rückblick auf die Jahre 1934-1945*, kleine Erweiterung, 1-2, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde.

<sup>62</sup> Frank S. Nugent, “New Censorial Swords Hang over Hollywood,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1937.

<sup>63</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 4827, June 2, 1932; Censorship Lists 1934, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>64</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 6577, 2-3.

Almost the same was true of films glorifying criminal life. In the 1930s many censorship boards feared that audiences would emulate the behavior depicted in American gangster pictures.<sup>65</sup> Using this logic, Germany now banned almost anything emphasizing criminality including numerous dramas, thrillers, comedies, and murder mysteries. But gangsters were the worst of all, and the most notorious gangster picture was *Scarface*. When it came up for review at the supreme censorship board, Seeger said exactly what everyone expected: the film made crime seem like a profession; the gangster went about in a tuxedo; beautiful women, champagne cocktails, and theater visits brightened his days – he had said all of this before. Then the distribution company surprised him. It argued that thanks to the Nazis' efforts at reducing crime in Germany, spectators would automatically disapprove of the behavior depicted in the film. It even added new intertitles ridiculing the United States' recent attacks on the Nazis (*How could this crime-ridden nation tell Germany what to do?*). Needless to say, Seeger was too clever for them. He agreed that the government had successfully reduced crime, but pointed out that *Scarface* threatened to stab all of its efforts in the back. In this way he made sure that Germany, like many other nations, would permit no gangster pictures within its borders.<sup>66</sup>

Even Seeger's more creative decisions had their counterparts around the world. On the surface, his objections to *Tarzan* may have seemed bizarre and unprecedented. At just the same time, though, France banned an American picture called *Caravan* which depicted a romance between a high political figure and a gypsy girl. Fox's local manager gave the following explanation: "The picture is as offensive to central Europe as would be a film in the United States showing the Secretary of State consorting with a woman of another race and color."<sup>67</sup> If that were France's position – and, indeed, the position of the United States – it wasn't much of a stretch to argue that *Tarzan* should be banned in Germany because it offended Nazi racial feelings.

All in all, then, these early cases didn't cause too much reason for worry. The coming of sound had dislodged Germany from its former position as Hollywood's number two export nation, and the coming of the Nazis was pushing it down further. But the Germans were still respecting the quota laws, and the Americans were still bringing a significant number of films into the country. As Fred Lange, Paramount's distribution chief for Europe, predicted, "All the difficulties put in the way of American pictures in Germany will have to end some day because they can't produce enough German pictures to fill their theaters on their own. They can't turn the theaters into garages, can they? There aren't enough cars. So they'll have to let American pictures come in in order to use all that expensive sound equipment."<sup>68</sup>

That was in early 1934, at exactly the same time as the *Prizefighter and the Lady* decision. Obviously Lange hadn't quite understood its significance.

In the months that followed, the American managers became increasingly concerned with the situation in Germany. According to the press they were getting grey hairs in their attempts to predict what would be permitted and what would not, while Seeger sat back, gnawed his moustache, and still found reason to reject their selections.

<sup>65</sup> Nugent, "New Censorial Swords."

<sup>66</sup> Oberprüfstelle report 7513, November 22, 1934, 3-7.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas W. Churchill, "Hollywood's Censor is All the World," *New York Times*, March 29, 1936.

<sup>68</sup> "Par Moves German Headquarters To Paris, but Continues Nazi Biz," *Variety*, April 17, 1934.

After complying with the Nazis' demands to "Aryanize" their offices, the managers felt that they deserved a break on the censorship issue. If Seeger wasn't going to permit as many films as before, he should at least tell them why.<sup>69</sup>

And then the answer started to dawn on them. Perhaps the decisions had nothing to do with the content of their pictures after all. "Censorship has become so severe," Canty reported, "that the rejection of one film after another for what appeared to be flimsy reasons gives rise to the thought that some sinister purpose, probably the continuance of Semitic antipathy, is the underlying motive in the governmental actions. But, of course, this cannot be proved, and one is forced to accept the official reasons for the censor rejections in question."<sup>70</sup>

The managers put their suspicions on hold at the end of the year when Seeger came to them with a generous offer. Instead of charging them the full 10,000 marks every time they submitted a film, he would allow them to have it screened by a pre-censorship committee for a fraction of the cost. There would be no need to invest in dubbing or subtitles at this early stage, for they could simply provide the original English version. Once the film received its certificate of "non-objection" from the committee, they could pay the remaining amount, and its official acceptance would be little more than a formality.<sup>71</sup>

All was going well until MGM submitted a musical entitled *The Merry Widow* starring Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald and directed by Ernst Lubitsch. Not only didn't it contain anything offensive, but it was just the kind of film which the Germans, "in view of their strong musical inclinations," could be expected to enjoy. Since so many films had been rejected recently, no one was that surprised when it was denied entry into Germany. The unusual thing was that this time the committee didn't even bother to give a reason for its decision.<sup>72</sup>

Fritz Strengtholt sprang to action. He told his star employee, the nephew of the German Foreign Minister, to meet with Seeger himself, and Seeger was forced to admit that *The Merry Widow* had been rejected because of its director, Ernst Lubitsch. He saw no point advancing it for official censorship when it was already destined to fail for this reason which had nothing to do with its actual content or character. The MGM representative asked whether the problem was that Lubitsch was a Jew, and Seeger refused to say. It certainly seemed to be the case.<sup>73</sup>

Strengtholt was stumped. He reported the results of the meeting to Canty, and Canty had some ideas of his own. He suspected that Seeger's "pre-censorship" committee did little more than determine whether a Jew had been involved in the production of a

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<sup>69</sup> "Tarzan' Latest Yank Pic Banned in Reich; Importers Worried," *Variety*, July 10, 1934; "U.S. Producers May Urge Hays Office to Force an Official Nazi Ruling on American Pix," *Variety*, April 3, 1934.

<sup>70</sup> Canty, "Outlook for the 1934/35 Season for German Films," Special Report 112, June 26, 1934, 8, Commerce Department.

<sup>71</sup> Canty, "Data for 1935 Film Year Book," October 22, 1934, 4-5, Commerce Department; Miller, "German Film Notes," Special Report 62, January 22, 1936, 11, Commerce Department; Paul H. Pearson, "Revision of World Motion Picture Data," Special Report 75, December 4, 1939, 8, Commerce Department.

<sup>72</sup> *The Merry Widow*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch, MGM, 1934; "Memorandum of Conversation between Mr. Schoenfeld and Mr. William A. Orr," January 23, 1935, State Department.

<sup>73</sup> Canty, "Confidential Memorandum to Mr. White, Chargé D'Affaires."

film – or, more precisely, a “non-Aryan,” for that was the term used by the authorities. In the past this was done verbally: Nazi officials would ask the American managers the same question, and “in the normal way” the managers would say that they were not in a position to respond.<sup>74</sup> Now the new committee was requesting written statements that none of the cast or crew of a particular film were “non-Aryan.” It appeared to Canty to be a tricky way of discriminating against Jews without directly saying so – and leaving the companies uncertain as to why their films were being banned in the first place.<sup>75</sup>

But Canty was getting used to these games, and he could play them too. Looking at the list of films currently being screened in Berlin, he noticed that three were directed by Jews of American origin. It seemed that the Nazis were more willing to turn a blind eye to these Jews than to the ones who had emigrated from Germany, probably because they were not as well known to the general public. Suddenly it hit him. He would argue that the American Jews couldn’t be classified as “non-Aryan” because the United States never classified anyone as “Aryan” in the first place. Only a German Jewish émigré could possibly be classified in this way. Admittedly the situation was more complicated with Lubitsch. Like Elisabeth Bergmar he was a Jew born in Germany, but unlike her he had left the country before Hitler came to power. The companies might still be able to say that, technically, he was not a “non-Aryan” under the provisions of the law.<sup>76</sup>

Canty quickly wrote to the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America with a suggestion. He said that the Propaganda Ministry most likely kept a list of all the known Jewish actors and directors working in Hollywood, and that it would try to place obstructions in the way of their films in Germany. All was not lost, though. If the MPPDA compiled a similar list minus the names of the German émigrés, they could give it to the Nazi authorities and request that these artists no longer be discriminated against.<sup>77</sup>

Whether or not such a list was ever compiled, the Nazis soon appeared to be doing exactly what Canty was hoping. The new director of “non-Aryan” art, Hans Hinkel, said that Germany didn’t object to American Jewish actors because the dubbing process virtually wiped out their influence anyway. He added that the question of eliminating Jewish participation from German cultural life was “purely an internal affair which in no case should be connected with the international film business.” If a company “openly and honorably” admitted whenever a Jewish actor, screenwriter, or producer was involved in the making of a film, then it would encounter no difficulties in Germany.<sup>78</sup>

It was a promising sign – but at exactly that moment Canty resigned from his position in Berlin, never to work in the film business again. He left behind his assistant Douglass Miller, and Miller seemed to take away everything Canty had achieved.<sup>79</sup>

The studios had been experiencing difficulties in Germany since Hitler came to power, but 1936 was a different story entirely. The pre-censorship committee rejected film after film, sometimes giving vague reasons (the cast was unsatisfactory, the story was silly), sometimes giving no reasons at all. By the middle of the year, the remaining

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<sup>74</sup> Canty, “Weekly Report.”

<sup>75</sup> Canty, “Confidential Memorandum.”

<sup>76</sup> Canty, “Confidential Memorandum.”

<sup>77</sup> Canty, “Confidential Memorandum.”

<sup>78</sup> “Jewish Films Not Barred,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1935.

<sup>79</sup> “U.S. Films Retain Lead in German Market Despite British Rivalry,” *Motion Picture Herald*, November 2, 1935.

companies in Germany had managed to have a total of eight pictures accepted by the authorities, when they needed ten or twelve each just to break even. The managers made inquiries to the officials in question, but without Cauty they were lost: they were simply referred from one person to another with no definite result. Meanwhile they obviously couldn't engage in their regular duties of dubbing and subtitling their pictures, let alone distributing them.<sup>80</sup>

There was just one hopeful sign. For the first time ever, the Propaganda Ministry agreed to admit one American manager into its Film Chamber. After considering various applicants, it allowed P.N. Brinck of Twentieth Century Fox to sit on the Chamber's Export and Import Committee. This was quite an honor. Brinck met with various officials from the Propaganda Ministry and they all told him they had no desire to see the American companies leave Germany, and that they hoped to make relations friendlier in general.<sup>81</sup>

All, that is, except Seeger. When Brinck met with the chief censor, he found him more realistic than the others. He also wondered whether the poor man was perhaps losing his memory. Seeger said that the reason so many American films had been turned down recently was that they were too rough for the German public. These films included *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, *Mutiny on the Bounty* (which actually was passed), *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Viva Villa* (also passed), and *A Message to Garcia*.<sup>82</sup>

Seeger then proceeded to say that the American companies obviously couldn't bring in pictures employing Jews in any capacity. Brinck noticed that the censor wasn't using the term "non-Aryan" anymore, so he asked him on what law he based his statement. Seeger replied that the Propaganda Ministry had given him definite instructions. Also the police were very concerned about "Jewish pictures" creating a public disturbance. Brinck understood that a "public disturbance" was simply an organized demonstration by the Storm Troops, so he pushed Seeger further. Could the chief censor provide him with a list of names which the Government considered undesirable, since he knew such lists existed? No, Seeger said, that would give rise to undesirable publicity – but he added that "a working agreement with American motion picture companies might be achieved so that they could get an approximate understanding of what the German Government's attitude was." With that, he told Brinck the meeting was over.<sup>83</sup>

And so all the Americans had was an obscure hint at some "working agreement" based on an "approximate understanding." This new conception of the Jewish issue was a lot murkier than the earlier, coordinated effort to deal with the quota law. With no one as gifted as Cauty to work out what it all meant – and with the censorship of individual films replacing the quota as the Americans' main problem in Germany – the companies lost the unity they once had. They split up. For the rest of their time in Germany, each company would forge its own "working agreement" with the Nazi authorities.

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<sup>80</sup> Milller, "Critical Situation of American Film Companies," May 14, 1936, 1, Commerce Department; Miller, "New Film Contingent Decree," July 25, 1936, 6-7, Commerce Department.

<sup>81</sup> Miller, "New Film Contingent Decree," 7; Miller, "German Film Situation at the Beginning of the Season 1936/37," August 14, 1936, 1, Commerce Department.

<sup>82</sup> Miller, "German Film Situation at the Beginning of the Season 1936/37," 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> Miller, "German Film Situation at the Beginning of the Season 1936/37," 2.



By this stage, most of the studios had already stopped doing business in Germany. One by one they had withdrawn from the market, sometimes drawing great attention to their decisions, other times saying nothing at all. In January 1933, the situation was very different: all the major studios were still submitting their pictures to the censors. Five of them – MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner Brothers, and Universal – had their own subsidiary offices in Berlin. The remaining three – United Artists, RKO, and Columbia – had all worked out deals with local distribution companies.<sup>84</sup>

The first studio to pull out of Germany entirely was Warner Brothers. As Jack Warner recalled in his autobiography, “I went to Max Reinhardt’s castle in Salzburg, Austria. There I got the sickening news that Joe Kauffman, our Warner Brothers man in Germany, had been murdered by Nazi killers in Berlin. Like many another outnumbered Jew, he was trapped in an alley. They hit him with fists and clubs, and kicked the life out of him with their boots, and left him lying there.”<sup>85</sup> According to this version of the story, Warner Brothers left Germany out of disgust at the new anti-Semitic measures and proved itself visionary among the other studios by leading a “crusade against fascism” and releasing *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* in 1939.<sup>86</sup>

In fact, the reality wasn’t quite so dramatic. For a start, Kauffman (whose actual name was Phil, not Joe) left Germany in 1934 after receiving verbal threats from the Nazis, and died peacefully in Stockholm later that year.<sup>87</sup> Kauffman’s reasons for pulling Warner Brothers out of the market had as little to do with morality as his death. After the studio’s gritty drama *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* enjoyed a 34-day run in Berlin in 1933, he hoped to have even more success with the hit musical *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Warner Brothers followed the instructions of the German Foreign Office and made significant cuts to the war film *Captured!*, expecting the musical to be permitted in return – but a few months later the censors found it “too leggy.” It was the final straw. Warner Brothers closed its offices in Germany, dismissed all of its staff, and looked for a deal with a local distribution company. The press announced that “Warner’s pictures are still for sale, theoretically, if anyone wants to buy them outright.” In 1935, a distributor managed to have one final Warner Brothers feature passed by the censors.<sup>88</sup>

United Artists experienced similar fortunes in Germany. The company was banned from the market in 1933 as a punishment for *Hell’s Angels*, but the following year it announced a new distribution deal with Bayerische Films, and said that all of its difficulties with the German government had been ironed out. It spoke too soon. Almost

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<sup>84</sup> Alexander Jason, *Handbuch des Films 1935/1936*, Berlin, 1936, 239, 240, 242.

<sup>85</sup> Jack L. Warner, *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood*, Random House, New York, 1964, 248-249.

<sup>86</sup> Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism*, New York University Press, New York, 1999; Christine Ann Colgan, *Warner Brothers’ Crusade against the Third Reich: A Study of Anti-Nazi Activism and Film Production 1933-1941*, unpublished dissertation, University of Southern California, 1985.

<sup>87</sup> “Phil Kaufmann Passes, WB European Head,” *Variety*, December 5, 1933.

<sup>88</sup> Canty, “Economic and Trade Notes,” 237, May 17, 1935, Commerce Department; “WB 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Co. to Bow out of Germany,” *Variety*, July 17, 1934; Frederick L. Herron to C. A. Muller, January 29, 1934, Embassy in Rome, 835a, Politisches Archiv, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin; “New European Film Map,” *Variety*, September 18, 1934; Censorship Lists, 1935, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

all of its submissions, including *Scarface*, were turned down by the censors, and only two minor features were screened.<sup>89</sup>

RKO and Columbia had slightly better luck. Each company brought a total of seven pictures into the Reich, and each had a major hit – RKO with *King Kong*, and Columbia with *It Happened One Night* which was the most popular film in Germany in 1935.<sup>90</sup> Both continued submitting pictures for the next few years, but when none were approved by the censors they simply stopped trying.

The story behind Universal Pictures was a bit more complicated. While it was of course responsible for releasing *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it was also the only American studio which invested heavily in local production. In 1932 it put out eleven German features, more than any other company except Ufa. If Carl Laemmle, the studio owner, was hoping that would save him, he was to be disappointed. As soon as the Nazis came to power they arrested and expelled his favorite nephew, Max Friedland, who was the local manager. The censors initially approved ten or twelve more pictures and then they started clamping down too. Pretty soon Universal decided to leave Germany for good.<sup>91</sup>

Or so it seemed. In 1936, Laemmle was forced to sell Universal to J. Cheever Cowdin, an American financier and sportsman, and early the following year the new owner travelled to Berlin. As the ambassador reported, Cowdin made an “unusual offer” to the Nazi authorities: “The company in question was previously controlled by Jewish interests but after recent reorganization it is understood that it is now non-Jewish. The representative mentioned had certain discussions with government officials and film interests with a view to explaining this particular point. He has reported success in convincing them in the matter, and thereafter a plan was considered whereby, probably in collaboration with German interests, his company might re-enter the German market.” The ambassador applauded the idea, saying that unless more of these kinds of schemes were developed, no American company would ever receive any leniency from the censors. He also made sure to point out that in spite of the “excellence and usability” of German films, they were rarely being shown in the United States, “as the controlling elements there were 99 per cent Jewish influenced.” After all the discussions, however, Universal’s “unusual” plans fell through, and the American ambassador was profoundly disappointed.<sup>92</sup>

That left the three most powerful Hollywood studios – MGM, Paramount, and Fox – alone in Germany. Of the three, the biggest by far was MGM, and in mid-1936, at the peak of its censorship troubles, it threatened to leave too. This was not an unusual occurrence: the company had done the same thing during the *Prizefighter and the Lady*

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<sup>89</sup> “Keine United Artists-Filme in Deutschland,” *Lichtbild-Bühne*, September 20, 1933; “United Artists Filme in Deutschland,” *Film-Kurier*, March 8, 1934; “UA Back into German Mart After 4 Yrs,” *Variety*, March 20, 1934.

<sup>90</sup> Miller, “German Film Problems,” Special Report 55, *German Film Problems*, December 23, 1935, 11, Commerce Department.

<sup>91</sup> Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz. Der amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, Trier, 1999, 91; Canty, “Weekly Report 43,” April 22, 1933, 4, Commerce Department; “Nazis Backing Down?” *Variety*, May 2, 1933; Censorship Lists, 1933-1934, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>92</sup> William E. Dodd to Secretary of State, February 8, 1937, 3-4, State Department; Dodd, “Memorandum for the Files,” February 8, 1937, 1-2, State Department.

case. The difference was that it wasn't just employing a business tactic this time; it was serious, and it had one stipulation. Since it didn't want to give its portion of the market to Fox and Paramount, MGM said it would only go if they went too. As the *Variety* correspondent in Berlin had observed a while earlier, "Nobody has courage enough to act without the other fellow."<sup>93</sup>

The fact was, these three companies had a serious investment in Germany. They had been there for years. They each gave direct employment to hundreds of German citizens, and they employed thousands more for dubbing, subtitling and printing films.<sup>94</sup> They sold a commodity that was extremely popular, especially in times when some German pictures were so bad that audiences were responding with "fake laughter" in the dark. And while they may not have been making a great deal of money, they weren't losing much either. At the end of 1936, the worst year by far for the American studios, Paramount reported a net loss of only \$580.<sup>95</sup> The company's foreign manager, Fred Lange, didn't want to give up on an investment that might make a lot more money in the future – after all, he knew that the Germans had "all that expensive sound equipment" – so he passed on MGM's offer.

He came up with another idea instead. When the censors turned down four Paramount pictures late in 1936, Lange asked one of his representatives in Berlin to contact the German Film Chamber. The representative wrote to the Nazi organization speculating on what was objectionable in each of the films. *Give Us This Night*, he imagined, was banned because the Jewish composer Erich Korngold had written the score. If that were the case, he could easily replace it with music written by a German composer and performed by a German orchestra. *The General Died at Dawn* was directed by Lewis Milestone, who also directed *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and he offered to slash his name from the credits. Finally, *The Texas Rangers* contained battle scenes with Indians which were too rough, so he prepared a new print containing a considerable number of cuts. His efforts paid off. The Film Chamber ordered the board of censors to approve *Texas Rangers* immediately, and it premiered simultaneously at two major theaters in Berlin.<sup>96</sup>

Lange was satisfied with the result, so he decided to push further. In early 1937 he made Paul Thieffes, a Nazi, head of Paramount in Germany. The gesture allowed one of Thieffes' men to secure a meeting with Seeger concerning the recent banning of ten more pictures. As it turned out, Seeger was unusually obliging. He explained straight away that all ten pictures starred Jews and émigrés, and he went through them one by one. *Give Us This Night* was unacceptable not only because of Korngold but also because it was a Lubitsch production involving four other Jews (Edwin Justus Mayer, a screenwriter; Oscar Hammerstein, a songwriter; Alan Mowbray, an actor; and A.E. Freudeman, an interior decorator). Cecil B. DeMille's *The Plainsman* couldn't be permitted because DeMille was supposedly a Jew who had sent a sympathetic telegram to Moscow, and

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<sup>93</sup> "Metro About Ready to Bow out of Germany if Par-20<sup>th</sup> will Likewise," *Variety*, July 22, 1936; "Par Leaving Germany with Notice to 150 Employees in Berlin," *Variety*, June 6, 1933.

<sup>94</sup> Miller, "Critical Situation of American Film Companies," May 14, 1936, 2, Commerce Department; R.M. Stephenson, "German Film Notes," Special Report 92, June 5, 1937, 12, Commerce Department.

<sup>95</sup> "Paramount Claims '36 Was Okay In Reich – Company Only Lost \$580," *Variety*, April 28, 1937.

<sup>96</sup> G.P. Vallar to Hans Weidemann, October 15, 1936, Reichsfilmkammer, R 56, VI, vol. 7, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde; Stephenson, "German Film Notes," Special Report 11, August 9, 1937, Commerce Department.

because Jean Arthur (admittedly an Aryan) had participated in an anti-Hitler meeting in Hollywood. *Outcast* was directed by Robert Florey, a Jew, and Seeger was about to reject it when he had a change of heart and told the representative that he would make an exception in this case. Paramount's tactics had succeeded once again.<sup>97</sup>

The unusual pair in charge of the company, Lange and Thiefes, could only go one step higher – and they did. Thiefes used his connections to arrange a meeting with one of Hitler's adjutants, Paul Wernicke. The Paramount representative presented Wernicke with yet another list of censor rejections, accompanied by more speculations for the reasons behind the decisions. For a third time he included *Give Us This Night* on the list, "guessing" that it had been banned because of Korngold. Not surprisingly, Wernicke ignored it, but he also recognized something called *The Jungle Princess* which Hitler had seen just a year earlier. The story was an inversion of *Tarzan* – this time a civilized man courted, loved, and protected a jungle woman – but Wernicke was willing to overlook that. He was also willing to overlook the studio's admission that the picture was directed by William Thiele, a Jew. The Paramount representative had kindly said that it was a "particular joy" to make Wernicke's acquaintance, so he recommended to the censors that *The Jungle Princess* be permitted.<sup>98</sup>

After all these interactions, Paramount was starting to develop a fairly good understanding of the Nazis' censorship practices. It had picked up on the new "working agreement" with respect to Jewish actors, directors, and screenwriters. It had gathered an extensive list of undesirable Hollywood personalities, even if it had given away a lot of names in return. But it wasn't the only studio experiencing difficulties in Germany. Twentieth Century Fox was also trying to work out the reasons behind its rejections, and it came up with a slightly different approach. In January 1938 the German office of the company formulated a letter to another of Hitler's adjutants, Wilhelm Brückner, pretending that it was conducting a survey of important statesmen all around the world:

We would be very grateful if you could provide us with a note from the Führer in which he expresses his opinion of the value and function of American films in Germany. We thank you for your kind support in this matter and we would be grateful if you could just send us a brief notification of whether our request will be granted by the Führer. Heil Hitler!

Fox's chances would undoubtedly have been better if it had put its German office under the charge of a Nazi. Since it didn't, it received the following reply: "The Führer refuses in principle to provide these kinds of judgments."<sup>99</sup>

It didn't matter; Paramount and Fox's troubles were nothing compared to what MGM was experiencing. There was a reason why the latter company had been the one to suggest leaving Germany: it was being treated differently from the others. This was apparent since the *Merry Widow* episode. When the nephew of the German Foreign

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<sup>97</sup> Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 69; Seeger to Propaganda Ministry, June 3, 1937, Persönliche Adjutantur des Führers, NS 10, vol. 48, Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde.

<sup>98</sup> Leo J. Horster to Paul Wernicke, October 4, 1937, NS 10, vol. 48; Description of *The Jungle Princess*, NS 10, vol. 48.

<sup>99</sup> Deutsche Fox-Film to Wilhelm Brückner, January 10, 1938, NS 10, vol. 48; Brückner to Deutsche Fox-Film, January 14, 1938, NS 10, vol. 48.

Minister met with Seeger about the case, he wanted to know why MGM couldn't bring a Lubitsch picture into Germany when Paramount could. Seeger's reply was extremely revealing: he said that MGM was considered a Jewish firm abroad, while Paramount and Fox were considered Aryan. The acting commercial attaché, Douglass Miller, was confused. "As a matter of fact," he thought, "Jewish influence is strong in all three American moving picture companies." There had to be another reason.<sup>100</sup>

A few possibilities sprang to mind. Whereas the local manager of MGM, Fritz Strengtholt, had caused quite a commotion a couple of years earlier, the representatives of Paramount and Fox had been more successful at cultivating personal contacts with Nazi officials. Still, that couldn't account for it, because Strengtholt had recently divorced his Jewish wife at the request of the Propaganda Ministry. (She ended up in a concentration camp.)<sup>101</sup>

Another issue was that an MGM employee in New York had made a public statement against the use of German goods, and it had received wide coverage in the newspapers. But the local representatives had gone on to purchase 100,000 marks of German products which they then shipped back to the same New York office.<sup>102</sup>

The real reason for the Nazis' preferential treatment of Paramount and Fox was more pragmatic. Unlike MGM, these companies both produced newsreels in Germany. Under the supervision of the Propaganda Ministry, they provided the Reich with regular reports on all its political events. Fox was the larger of the two, and its partnership with the Nazis had particularly deep roots. In 1932 it provided the Party with a sound man to help with that year's ruthless election campaign. After Hitler came to power, it offered the services of eight cameramen to cover the annual Nuremberg Rallies, while Paramount contributed only three. On a special occasion, it even prepared a review of the achievements of the Nazi Party, and the press reported, "Fox could barely have given a more beautiful synopsis."<sup>103</sup>

Only once did an awkward situation arise from the fact that an American company was the largest producer of newsreels in Germany, along with Ufa. In mid-1937, the War Office forbade it from taking further footage of army maneuvers, and one of Goering's assistants told the newspapers that the company was being suspected of espionage. Goering was furious – but not at Fox. He announced that his assistant's comments were completely unfounded, and that the American company had never failed in its loyalty to his Department.<sup>104</sup>

There was another reason why the Nazis wanted Paramount and Fox to make newsreels in Germany. Unlike Ufa, these companies could screen their footage of the "important German nationalistic events" in the United States. In accordance with the wishes of the Propaganda Ministry, and much to the chagrin of several American theater

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<sup>100</sup> Miller, "Difficulties of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Film A.G.," April 23, 1936, 1, Commerce Department.

<sup>101</sup> Miller, "Difficulties of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Film A.G.," 2; Barbara Hull, *An Oral History with Robert Vogel*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, 1991, 120.

<sup>102</sup> Miller, "Difficulties of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Film A.G.," 2.

<sup>103</sup> Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 94-95; Bruno Stindt to Weidemann, August 30, 1936, R 56, VI, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Hartmann to Weidemann, August 24, 1936, R 56, VI, 7; Weidemann to German Air Force (draft), October 12, 1936, R 56, VI, 7; Gritzbach to Propaganda Ministry, October 15, 1936, R 56, VI, 7.

owners, these tended to provide a very generous account of what was going on in Germany.<sup>105</sup> Here were some of the newsreels that Fox exported to the rest of the world in 1934:

*Rally of Allegiance to the Führer:* Adolf Hitler greets the national guard from the window of the Chancellery as the Berlin population erupts with thunderous shouts of “Heil!”<sup>106</sup>

*The First Monument of the National Socialist Movement:* In Bayreuth, the head of the German Labor Front Dr. Robert Ley holds the solemn opening of a Cenotaph in honor of National Socialism.<sup>107</sup>

*Celebration of the Workers of the German Nation:* The Führer speaks at the workplace of the autobahn (from Munich to the border) to open the workers’ great battle for the year 1934.<sup>108</sup>

*National Holiday of the German People:* The Chancellor gives his salute to the entire Berlin school community in the Berlin Lustgarten. Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels speaks to the German Culture Chamber in the Berlin Opera House. The biggest rally that the world has ever seen takes place on the Tempelhof field, where the Führer speaks in front of two million comrades.<sup>109</sup>

Of course, Paramount and Fox weren’t producing these newsreels out of the kindness of their hearts; they had their own motivations too. From July 1934 onwards, any foreign company seeking to take money out of Germany had to pay 60 per cent of the total to the government. This left the studios with two options: they could resign themselves to massive losses, or they could reinvest their money in Germany. In the past they had participated in German film production, but now that would be like throwing money down the drain. The only solution was to put the proceeds from their films into the making of newsreels, which they could then distribute to the rest of the world. This was something MGM couldn’t do, and that was why it suggested collective withdrawal from the German market.<sup>110</sup>

When Paramount and Fox refused, MGM had to come up with an idea of its own – and eventually it did. The company learned that it could get its money out of the

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<sup>105</sup> Canty, “Outlook for the 1934/35 Season for German Films,” June 26, 1934, 10, Commerce Department; Miller, “New Film Contingent Decree,” Special Report 12, July 25, 1936, 7, Commerce Department; Robert N. Nodurft, *Hollywood’s Road to War: the Film Industry and the Great Debate over Intervention*, unpublished dissertation, Purdue University, 1995, 11; Colgan, “Warner Brothers’ Crusade,” 50.

<sup>106</sup> “Fox Toenende Wochenschau A.-G Berlin, Programm,” July 5, 1934, German Embassy in Riga, Box 104, Politisches Archiv, German Foreign Office, Berlin.

<sup>107</sup> “Fox Toenende Wochenschau A.-G Berlin, Programm,” July 26, 1934, German Embassy in Riga.

<sup>108</sup> “Fox Toenende Wochenschau A.-G Berlin, Programm,” March 22, 1934, German Embassy in Riga.

<sup>109</sup> “Fox Toenende Wochenschau A.-G Berlin, Programm,” May 3, 1934, German Embassy in Riga.

<sup>110</sup> Otto D. Tolischus, “Debt Parley Ends with Reich Asking Six Months’ Respite,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1934; Canty, “Outlook for the 1934/35 Season,” 9-10; Gerhard Kümmel, “Transnational Economic Cooperation and the Nation State,” Columbia University Press, New York, 2001, 43; Bernd Jürgen Wendt, *Deutschland 1933-1945. Das “Dritte Reich.” Handbuch zur Geschichte*, Fackelträger, Hannover, 1995, 214.

country if it invested in certain firms where credit was “badly needed.” In December 1938, after accruing a large number of German marks from four-and-a-half years of film sales, it began financing the armament industry in Austria and the Sudetenland.<sup>111</sup>

Ernst Seeger was growing tired of the film business. He had started out as a lawyer, and when he accepted a censorship position during the World War, he most likely thought it would be a temporary measure. Instead it turned into a career. For twenty-two years he rose in the ranks, working first for the Foreign Office, then for the Ministry of the Interior, and finally for the Propaganda Ministry, every day moving further away from his original legal aspirations. On Tuesday August 17, 1937, in his fifty-third “living year” as the newspaper put it, he was pulled away forever. “The holes that his death has left in the Propaganda Ministry,” the paper announced, “will be hard to repair.”<sup>112</sup>

In fact, Seeger had dug those holes himself. He had turned the German censorship system from one based on content to one based on racial origins. That system was about to be called into question.

At the time of his death, things were actually looking up for the Hollywood studios. Back in 1936, they had managed to sell only 29 pictures in Germany. In 1937 they sold 33, and in 1938 they sold 41, almost as many as in the year before Hitler came to power.<sup>113</sup> The reason for the improvement was clear: the studios were coming to understand the new censorship policy, and they were starting to play the game themselves. As long as they didn’t submit any pictures containing well-known Jews, they could continue doing business in Germany.

Then came Kristallnacht: the savage destruction of thousands of Jewish homes and businesses, followed by a wave of increased anti-Semitic measures around the country. The new spirit pervaded everything in the ensuing weeks, including the film business. On November 22, 1938, Goebbels’ newspaper boldly announced, “One-third of Hollywood stars are Jews.” The paper proceeded to give 64 names of the most prominent Jewish producers, directors, and actors, leaving no doubt as to who controlled the studios. “There are seven Cohns as producers!” it added.<sup>114</sup>

The very next day the Propaganda Ministry released copies of its infamous Hollywood “black list” to the American authorities. It contained the same number of names as the list from *Der Angriff*, but it replaced some of the Jewish names with those of political opponents of the Nazi regime.<sup>115</sup> Although Seeger was gone, his system remained, and now it was completely formalized. The censorship authorities could permit or reject pictures simply by determining whether they involved the participation of anyone on the “black list.” The American studios could go through their own holdings just as automatically.

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<sup>111</sup> Stephenson, “German Film Notes,” Special Report 53, December 30, 1938, 3a, Commerce Department.

<sup>112</sup> “Ministerialrat Dr. Seeger,” *Film-Kurier*, August 18, 1937.

<sup>113</sup> There are some inconsistencies with the figures. The acting commercial attaché in Berlin in 1939 stated that the Americans sold 39 films to Germany in 1937, and only 35 in 1938. The figures provided above were calculated by going through every commercial attaché report on Hollywood movies from 1936-1938. Paul H. Pearson, “Revision of World Motion Picture Data,” Special Report 75, December 4, 1939, Commerce Department.

<sup>114</sup> Curt Belling, “Ein Drittel der Hollywood-Stars sind Juden,” *Der Angriff*, November 22, 1938.

<sup>115</sup> Miller, “German ‘Black List’ of American Film Actors, Directors, and Scenario Writers,” Economic and Trade Note 118, November 23, 1938, Commerce Department.

At around the same time, another important development took place in Germany: the arrival of Technicolor. Two years earlier, Paramount had made *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the first-ever Technicolor picture containing outdoor shots, and the censors had rejected it because it starred the Jewish actress Silvia Sidney.<sup>116</sup> With the growing awareness of the Nazis' censorship methods, Twentieth Century Fox wasn't going to make the same mistake. The company submitted two Technicolor pictures free of any obvious Jewish influence, and both were accepted immediately. *Ramona* and *Wings of the Morning* premiered at cinemas around the country, performed extremely well at the box office, and according to all accounts were received with unanimous enthusiasm and unusually strong applause.<sup>117</sup>

The press's response was almost as consistent. For years the daily papers had separated the technical achievements of American pictures from their storylines. In one half of a review, the critic would compliment the "excellent photography." In the other half, he would either throw around phrases like "kitsch," "happy end," or "American sentimentality," or more likely be enthusiastic about the "light comedy touch." Technicolor provided the perfect opportunity to continue this approach. The reviews of *Ramona* and *Wings of the Morning* went overboard in describing the magnificent beauty of the images and then spouted out the typical catchphrases. In other words they were unremarkable in every way.<sup>118</sup>

These days it was getting hard to write anything else. In late 1936, Goebbels had abolished film criticism in Germany, replacing it with an order to provide film "description" instead.<sup>119</sup> A few months later he told the newspapers to reduce their reports on Hollywood gossip as well.<sup>120</sup> He was growing tired of the way German pictures were being compared unfavorably to American ones. Surprisingly, his efforts weren't entirely successful. Many papers, even the *Völkischer Beobachter*, continued printing photographs of Hollywood stars and giving reviews of films that went beyond mere description.<sup>121</sup> At the same time, they had to adhere to certain limits. The reviews could no longer be excessively complimentary. They couldn't be overly critical either, for that would imply an attack on the censorship office for approving the film in question.

Still, every now and then someone would write an exceptional piece on a Hollywood movie, and that was what happened with the advent of Technicolor. In a journal called *Neue Literatur*, a critic named Wilhelm Frels announced that color had

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<sup>116</sup> *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, dir. Henry Hathaway, Paramount, 1936; Vallar to Weidemann, October 15, 1936.

<sup>117</sup> Stephenson, "German Film Notes," Special Report 80, May 7, 1937, Commerce Department; Stephenson, "German Film Notes," Special Report 37, December 8, 1937, Commerce Department; "Annabellas farbigste Rolle," *Berliner Tageblatt*, October 20, 1937; "Ramona," *Film-Kurier*, March 10, 1937.

<sup>118</sup> "Ramona. Amerikanischer Farbenfilm im Capitol," *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 11, 1937; "Bunte 'Ramona'. Farbenfilm im Capitol am Zoo," *Der Angriff*, March 11, 1937; "Der Erste Farben-Grosfilm. 'Ramona' im Capitol," *Berliner Tageblatt*, March 10, 1937; "Kalifornische Romantik in Farben. Ramona," *Der Film*, March 13, 1937; "Annabella in 'Zigeunerprinzessin'. Neuer Farbfilm im Berliner Capitol am Zoo," *Der Angriff*, October 20, 1937; "Landschaft und Lächeln – bunt. Capitol zeigte Annabella im Farbenfilm," *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 20, 1937.

<sup>119</sup> Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 238.

<sup>120</sup> *Pressebestellung*, January 28, 1937, Zsg. 102, Bd. 62, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz; *Pressebestellung*, July 22, 1937, Zsg. 102, Bd. 62.

<sup>121</sup> "Bitte, nicht so fein," *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 2, 1937.



ushered in a new ice age in film history. He emphasized that his prophecy had nothing to do with the tiresome discussion of whether the technology brought film closer to reality or improved it as an art form. He was much more concerned with the insidious effort of the American producers to use its novelty to fool the unsuspecting German public. As he explained, "Colored films love to use colored people because of their more effective coloring."<sup>122</sup>

He was absolutely right. Both *Ramona* and *Wings of the Morning* told stories about non-whites, and both lingered on their bodies as objects of attraction and fascination. No other reviewer had picked up on this connection before.

The first Technicolor picture to be screened in Germany, Frels said, was nothing more than a dirty trick. In its provocative opening sequence, an Indian chief named Alessandro stumbled upon a beautiful white girl who was stuck in a tree. He helped her down even though she told him to go away, and he ignored her even though she called out for a white man instead. It was obvious that the girl was uncomfortable, but he simply couldn't hear her: he was looking into her eyes and smiling uncontrollably and replying "Yes, *Senorita*" to everything she said. Later that evening there was a celebration in her honor, and he learned that her name was "Ramona" and that dozens of men had ridden more than forty miles just to dance with her.<sup>123</sup>

It was one thing for an Indian to be attracted to a white girl, but it was quite another when she was attracted to him. Ramona caught one of her servants staring at Alessandro and saying what they both were thinking: "I know he's an Indian, but I don't care. I think he's the handsomest man I ever saw." Ramona dismissed her and started flirting with Alessandro herself, and soon the two girls were bickering over him. Of course Ramona ended up in Alessandro's arms, and the Technicolor picture captured something that was absolutely shocking: a white girl kissing a man dressed in colorful Indian garb.

That was when the trick was revealed. Ramona's stepmother walked in on the dreadful scene and sent the Indian away. "You've been brought up in my house as my own daughter," she said to Ramona. "All the time I've lived in fear that the blood of your mother would come out."

"How can you speak that way of my mother," Ramona protested. "Why, she was your own sister."

"She was not!" the stepmother yelled. "She was an Indian squaw." And Ramona learned that her father, "a man of good family," had made a tragic mistake with a native woman.

But she didn't react the way her stepmother expected. "Then I belong to Alessandro's people," she said simply.

"You'll not go back to the very thing your father thought he had saved you from?"

"Nothing else matters except for the fact that I love Alessandro."

Later that night, Ramona left the ranch on which she had been brought up, and ran back into Alessandro's arms. As they kissed for a second time, the image on the screen tried to atone for the earlier, shocking one. Maybe it was the darkness of the night, or

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<sup>122</sup> Wilhelm Frels, "Unsere Meinung," *Die neue Literatur*, April 1938, 213-214.

<sup>123</sup> *Ramona*, dir. Henry King, Twentieth Century Fox, 1936.

maybe it was that of the revelation – whatever the case, the contrast between the two lovers didn't seem anywhere near as sharp as before.

Still, that didn't excuse the film in Wilhelm Frels' eyes. He felt it was in bad taste to play games with mixed marriage, especially since the Government had put so much effort into eradicating the problem. While he found the picture offensive, though, it wasn't the worst depiction he had seen. "This subject, which is a bluff in *Ramona*," he said, "in *Wings of the Morning* turns out to be a completely unambiguous statement."<sup>124</sup>

Frels probably wasn't that surprised when *Ramona* was passed by the censors. He had almost certainly read the Karl May stories which were massively popular in Germany, and which presented a romantic image of the dying Indians. Since even Hitler was a fan of these stories, it was plausible that a Hollywood movie could show (in *Der Angriff*'s words) "the conflict between the brave Indians and the evil white race."<sup>125</sup> *Wings of the Morning* was something else entirely. It dealt with one of the groups which the Nazis had explicitly selected for persecution. Its title in Germany was *The Gypsy Princess*.

Here, once again, was a Technicolor film taking the side of "colored people." It exposed the persecution of gypsies by the police, and aligned itself firmly with the victims. It showed a white man falling for a gypsy girl and apologizing for the prejudice of his friends ("These people, they've got no imagination, no understanding"). And it consciously made use of its new capabilities, showing a white dog playing with a colored one. "Look," the man said. "Scruffy got his wish!" Sure enough, by the end of the film, he got his wish too.<sup>126</sup>

This time it wasn't a trick. The man didn't turn out to be a gypsy in the end. The film was making a "completely unambiguous statement" in favor of mixed marriage. Frels was disgusted. The first two Technicolor movies to appear in Germany used the technological advance to glorify "colored people." He wasn't sure if the Americans were doing this out of principle or out of foolishness, but he wasn't holding his breath to find out. The next Technicolor picture would probably provide the answer, he said, but he for one wasn't going to watch it.<sup>127</sup>

The critic was wrong about one detail. The Americans did confront the issue of mixed marriage in another picture. Funnily enough, however, they did it in black and white.

A few months after the success of *Ramona* and *Wings of the Morning*, the head of Paramount in Germany, Paul Thieffes, examined his current holdings. He sifted out everything that would be banned as a result of the "black list," and one of the leftover pictures caught his eye. It was called *Shanghai*. He made a single small cut at the end, and since he was a member of the Nazi Party he took it to the new head of the Film Department, Ernst von Leichtenstern. His case was clear enough: here was a film, he said, in which the Americans were finally dealing seriously with the race problem. Von Leichtenstern was a stubborn man – almost as stubborn as Seeger. He argued back and forth with Thieffes, and finally agreed to permit the picture, with one stipulation. He was

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<sup>124</sup> Frels, "Unsere Meinung," 214.

<sup>125</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, Penguin, London, 1998, 15, 17; "Bunte 'Ramona.'"

<sup>126</sup> *Wings of the Morning*, dir. Harold D. Schuster, Twentieth Century Fox, 1937.

<sup>127</sup> Frels, "Unsere Meinung," 214.

permitting it not because it dealt with the race problem, but because Paramount had nothing better to offer.<sup>128</sup>

Thiefes ignored that last part and went to the press, and soon the word got out that Hollywood had made an important picture. “Whenever an earth-shattering problem emerges, like the race problem, the American production companies go along with it,” the newspapers announced. “Not only does *The Jungle Princess* have overtones of the race problem; it is actually the content of the new film *Shanghai*. The fact that the Asian-American intermarriage problem is acted out and solved by two such striking actors as Charles Boyer and Loretta Young will ensure that this film will receive particular attention in Germany.”<sup>129</sup>

Von Leichtenstern was not at all happy with this turn of events. He had explicitly told Thiefes not to market the film for its treatment of the race problem. The Americans were unable to understand such matters, he had said, for they were not a “race” themselves. Any attempt to interpret *Shanghai* in this way would only lead to difficulties.<sup>130</sup>

For a start, the casting of the film was confusing. Loretta Young was the same actress who had played Ramona, and she found herself in almost the same situation as in the earlier movie. She was on vacation in Shanghai, and when she met a man named Dmitri Koslov, she barely managed to get out more than a few polite formalities. “You must think me awfully rude,” she finally said. “I haven’t stopped staring at you from the moment you walked in.” “Well, if that is rudeness,” Koslov replied, “then I am guilty also.” They went on a tour of the city, and after a few hours together she indicated her intentions towards him by burning her return ticket to the United States. It was Ramona and Alessandro all over again – only this time they were both white.<sup>131</sup>

At least it seemed that way. The figure of Koslov was more mysterious. He was played by a Frenchman, Charles Boyer, and he was apparently a Russian businessman doing well in Shanghai.<sup>132</sup> Then one day he had his friend Lun Sing over for tea, and the truth emerged. While his father was a native Russian, his mother came from Manchuria. In Shanghai that made him an outcast. Lun Sing advised him to give up on his romance, or else his business plans would fail. He then took a sip of his tea, and smiled. “I often say, next to myself, no one in Shanghai serves such tea as Dmitri Koslov.”

The expression on Koslov’s face didn’t change with Lun Sing’s remark. “Clever tea makers,” he replied gravely, “we Chinese.”

It was an awkward moment. Charles Boyer was universally known as the classic French lover, and he was having enough trouble passing for a Russian. The scene was hardly believable. There was just one thing that saved it: no one could know exactly what the actor looked like, because the film was shot in black and white.

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<sup>128</sup> *Pressebestellung*, January 9, 1939, Zsg. 110, Bd. 11, 22-23.

<sup>129</sup> “Das amerikanische Angebot,” *Der deutsche Film*, 3, September 1938, 67.

<sup>130</sup> *Pressebestellung*, January 9, 1939, Zsg. 110, Bd. 11, 22.

<sup>131</sup> *Shanghai*, dir. James Flood, Paramount, 1935.

<sup>132</sup> A few years earlier, Boyer had starred in an intriguing American picture called *Private Worlds*, which gave a humane portrait of life in a psychiatric institution. It played in Germany at the same time as some short films, commissioned by Hitler, advocating the extermination of the mentally ill. Despite the obvious contradiction with the official Propaganda, *Private Worlds* barely aroused comment in the press. It was directed by Gregory La Cava, who had made *Gabriel over the White House*. *Private Worlds*, dir. La Cava, Paramount, 1935.

In any case, Koslov ignored Lun Sing's advice. He invited all the most important socialites of Shanghai over to his house – even the most established families like the Hiltons and the Truesdales – and he announced that his mother was a Manchurian princess. (For some reason, whenever a man had relations with a woman of a different race, she always turned out to be a princess.)<sup>133</sup> Upon hearing the news, Loretta Young walked out like everyone else, but she quickly realized her mistake, and she came back to ask for his forgiveness.

"The thing you told us that night was quite a shock," she said. "I thought I was tolerant and open-minded, but to my amazement I found myself reacting the same way as the rest of your stupid guests. Should I hate you for something over which you had no control? Your mother was a princess. My only fear is that I'm not good enough for you."

As much as Koslov loved her, however, he was having none of it. "The world is full of people, and people are full of prejudice," he replied. "Wherever we go, we'll find people like the Hiltons and the Truesdales. Their names will be different but their animosities will be the same." The couple then looked into the camera with tears in their eyes, and the film came to an end. All that was cut was Koslov's final line: "Someday prejudice may die, convention go stale. Men will be judged not for their creed or color but for their merits. We may not live to see that day – I pray God we will."<sup>134</sup>

And *this* was the long-awaited picture that was supposed to be the Americans' contribution to the race problem in Germany! Von Leichtenstern had obviously made a mistake in approving it. He had checked the racial origins of the main actors, but he hadn't paid enough attention to its content. He quickly assembled a group of journalists and ordered them to review it in the papers as a superficial treatment of an extremely serious problem.<sup>135</sup>

Everyone obeyed. One reviewer wrote that the couple had wisely decided to abandon their romance, and added that he had laughed at the overblown sentimentality of the ending. Another said that this part was so abrupt that it made no sense: he had to consult his program to discover that the couple parted after the film was over. All the reviewers agreed that *Shanghai* failed to provide a serious treatment of the race problem, and that it merely used race to tell a soppy American love story.<sup>136</sup>

The outbreak of war in September 1939 didn't end Hollywood's film sales to Germany – the neutrality of the United States allowed business to continue as usual. Nevertheless, the most radical wing of the Nazi Party, which had always been opposed to the infiltration of foreign culture, became more powerful under the new conditions. The SS began issuing reports targeting American film screenings, with two principal complaints. The movies often starred French and English actors who were citizens of enemy nations; and the pairing of Hollywood productions with domestic newsreels had a confusing effect on the spectator.<sup>137</sup> Not everyone agreed with this second complaint. A few weeks after the invasion of Poland, a theater in Berlin screened the latest newsreel of

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<sup>133</sup> Hence titles like *The Jungle Princess*, *The Gypsy Princess*, etc.

<sup>134</sup> Zensurkarte, *Mädchen in Schanghai*, Prüf-Nr. 49257, Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv.

<sup>135</sup> *Pressebestellung*, January 9, 1939, Zsg. 110, Bd. 11, 22-23.

<sup>136</sup> "Mädchen in Shanghai," *Der Angriff*, September 17, 1938; "Das Rassenproblem in Amerika. Mädchen in Shanghai," *Der Film*, September 17, 1938; "Mädchen von Shanghai," *Film-Kurier*, September 16, 1938.

<sup>137</sup> Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Die geheime Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1938-1945*, Manfred Pawlak Verlagsgesellschaft, Herrsching, vol. 4, 1168; Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz*, 298-304.

the German victory, and then followed it with “the sequel”: an American movie called *Too Hot to Handle* which was a spoof of the newsreel business. According to the reviewer in *Der Angriff*, spectators responded to the first images with “tumultuous, grateful applause.” They then witnessed “such irresistibly crazy things” in the Clark Gable film that by the end they couldn’t stop laughing.<sup>138</sup>

The SS men didn’t tend to go into this kind of detail in their reports. On two rare occasions, however, they were so offended by the censors’ decisions that they made exceptions. In January 1940, Fox submitted a Shirley Temple movie called *Susannah of the Mounties* to the German authorities. The movie gave a typical romantic portrayal of Indians being victimized by a few evil whites, and it was approved under the title *Miss Winnetou*, a tribute to Karl May’s greatest Indian hero. Since Shirley Temple was a huge star in Germany, the press responded with the usual praise, citing *Miss Winnetou* as an example of “romantic harmlessness.” The SS knew better. They noticed that it contained a shocking scene in which the innocent girl became “blood brothers” with an Indian boy.<sup>139</sup> “We are astounded that films with Shirley Temple are currently being screened in Munich, for this actress represents the enemy propaganda of the United States,” they wrote. “We are lodging particular complaints against the press for casting *Miss Winnetou* in a positive light.”<sup>140</sup>

A few months later, the SS was even more outraged that *Ramona* was still being screened in the Reich. “The main criticism of the plot is that an Indian, whom the whites originally hated, is suddenly considered their equal simply because of his conversion to Catholicism,” the report ran. “We are unable to understand how a film whose content so grossly contradicts National Socialist ideology can still be shown.”<sup>141</sup>

The reason, of course, was simple: the censors were rejecting movies not for the racial elements of their content but for the racial origins of their cast. That meant that a few subversive images of relationships between whites and non-whites were still being shown in Germany. After the SS men clamped down at the beginning of 1940, all that stopped. There were no more sympathetic portrayals of Asians, Indians, or gypsies. There was something else, though, and it went beyond the borders of the imaginable.

*Let Freedom Ring* wasn’t an exceptional movie in any way. If anything it was a completely generic Hollywood production. It combined one of the most overused stories – the railroads invading the Old West – with a few conventional musical numbers performed by the bland baritone Nelson Eddy.<sup>142</sup> But it was also written by the most prolific screenwriter in the business, Ben Hecht, and Hecht used to play a little game with himself. He would have his hero utter a “few semi-intelligent remarks” before the end of a picture, and he would try his best not to have them cut out by the producer. In this case, he not only managed to get them past Louis B. Mayer and the MPPDA but also the Nazi censors.<sup>143</sup>

The setup was conventional enough: A railroad owner named Jim Knox was using dirty business methods against the honest inhabitants of a small town. He would offer to

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<sup>138</sup> “Clark Gable gibt an,” *Der Angriff*, October 5, 1939.

<sup>139</sup> *Susannah of the Mounties*, dir. William A. Seiter, Twentieth Century Fox, 1939; Zensurkarte, *Fräulein Winnetou*, Prüf-Nr. 52619.

<sup>140</sup> Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, vol. 3, 741.

<sup>141</sup> Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, vol. 4, 971.

<sup>142</sup> *Let Freedom Ring*, dir. Jack Conway, MGM, 1939.

<sup>143</sup> Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954, 473.

buy their land for a low price, and if they refused to sell he would have his men burn their houses down. One evening he paid a visit to a landowner named Tom Logan who was being particularly stubborn. The old man kept saying that his son Steve, a Harvard-educated lawyer, would soon be back to stand up for everyone's rights. At just that moment, Steve walked through the door. He chided his father for getting in the way of progress, and expressed his willingness to cooperate with Jim Knox.

Of course he was lying. He was on the side of his family and friends, but he needed them to hate him if he was going to achieve his objective. His plan was to save the town by seizing on an inalienable right: the freedom of the press. He printed a large number of inflammatory pamphlets and distributed them to Knox's foreign workers, urging them all to unite as Americans and stand up against their tyrannical leader. It was a dangerous move in a society controlled by a tyrant – in fact it was just what a group of Munich students called The White Rose did in July 1942, and they were all executed within 24 hours of their capture.<sup>144</sup> Steve's actions were similar to those of The White Rose in another way: in the context of this screening, they were directed not towards Americans but towards Germans. Steve – or, rather, Ben Hecht – was telling the audience not to accept the tyranny of their own ruler.

Unfortunately it wasn't the most powerful message. Hecht was disguising his opinion in a film, not handing out pamphlets himself. He had to try something else. In a song entitled "Where Else but Here" he had his hero tell Knox's foreign workers that America was the only country in which they could truly be free. Once again the message was disguised. All the characters in the film were simply enjoying the music. Even his enemy had no idea that the lyrics were meant to be offensive. The German censors, on the other hand, did. At one point Steve turned to a character named Fritz, and said "You like sauerkraut, schnitzel, schmearkäse, pigs' feet, pretzels, beer/ Take your Fräulein, sing and waltz, hug and kiss mit lots of schmaltz." "Jawohl," Fritz said. "Hoopla, go ahead, ausgezeichnet!" Steve replied. The censors cut the song from the German version.<sup>145</sup>

They didn't cut everything, however. At the climax of the film, Steve had a debate with Jim Knox in front of the poor, exploited workers, and the dialogue remained. Steve was telling them to stand up for their rights, and Knox was telling them to go away.

"Will you listen to me once more?" Steve begged. "The cattle boats brought you over here but I say you're men."

"Get back to your bunkhouses, all of you!"

"I say you came here looking for liberty and freedom, and you'll not lie down in the mud at Jim Knox's feet."

"Don't listen to him, I'm boss here."

"Your boss calls you the pick of the swillbarrels and the riffraff of everywhere. I call you something else. I call you Americans."

"Come on, come on, I'm giving orders"

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<sup>144</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945: Nemesis*, Penguin, London, 2000, 552, 663; *Sophie Scholl – Die Letzten Tage*, dir. Marc Rothemund, Goldkind Filmproduktion, 2005.

<sup>145</sup> Zensurkarte, *Rivalen*, Prüf-Nr. 53290; PCA file on *Let Freedom Ring*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

“THERE’S NO TRYANT TO GIVE ORDERS IN THIS COUNTRY! THERE’S NO MAN BIGGER OR STRONGER THAN YOU IF YOU’LL RAISE YOUR HEADS!”

“Come on sheriff, get him out of here.”

And that was when something extraordinary happened. The camera cut to a shot of Steve standing alone, and this character – played by Nelson Eddy, the bland baritone – looked the Third Reich in the face and delivered “his few semi-intelligent remarks”: “You Germans and Italians, you Jews and Russians and Irish, *all you who are oppressed* – ”

Well... it might not have happened. The lines might not have gotten past the censorship board. MGM might not have included them in the first place. The audience might never have heard them. If that were the case, though, no one pointed it out. According to all the remaining documents, the speech was left untouched.<sup>146</sup>

All the documents except one. A reviewer from a film journal came out of the screening with a strange interpretation of the scene. In his view, the “unnamed writer” of the picture had succeeded in showing how a young man stood up to a “dirty Jewish exploiter.”<sup>147</sup> In other words, he thought that the character of Jim Knox was meant to be a Jew. No other reviewer emerged with this impression – possibly no other reviewer thought that “Knox” was a Jewish name. Still, it was a legitimate position, because no one knew that the “unnamed writer” of the screenplay was a Jew himself. The fact that the reviewer interpreted the movie as a single man’s courageous struggle against Jewish bribery and corruption – a simple extension of the message behind *Gabriel over the White House* – proved that even the bad films could always be construed as good.<sup>148</sup>

*Let Freedom Ring* was one of the final Hollywood movies to be screened in Germany. MGM, Paramount, and Fox had all noticed that the censors were clamping down on them more than ever before. At the peak of their difficulties a few years earlier, Douglass Miller had reflected on the situation of the American companies, and he had made an observation which was becoming pertinent once again.

It would ... be unfortunate for German-American relations if our motion picture companies no longer feel that they have any possibility of selling films in Germany or any further interest in considering the German point of view. American film companies are always working under the temptation of portraying foreign countries in an unfavorable light. They must have villains but through the desire of selling pictures in foreign countries are barred from any unfavorable treatment of nationals of such countries ... If all our film ties with Germany are severed, American film companies will jump at the chance of using stories which will portray Germany and the Germans in an unfavorable light, not because they desire to injure Germany but because they are hungry for villains and desire a relief from the monotony of always using Americans or unnamed foreigners in this connection.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Zensurkarte, *Rivalen*; [German Censorship Report,] PCA file on *Let Freedom Ring*.

<sup>147</sup> Ernst Jerosch, “Rivalen,” *Der Film*, March 2, 1940.

<sup>148</sup> *Gabriel over the White House*, dir. Gregory La Cava, MGM, 1933.

<sup>149</sup> Miller, “Critical Situation of American Film Companies,” 2.

Miller was absolutely right that the one thing preventing the studios from attacking the Germans was the fact that they were still selling them their product. He was wrong, though, about the timing. He was envisaging a massive surge of anti-German movies in 1936. He was off by more than half a decade.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### “Switched Off”

*“I wrote ‘It Can’t Happen Here,’ but I begin to think it certainly can.”*<sup>1</sup>  
Sinclair Lewis, February 15, 1936

Only a few months after Hitler attained power, a new German consul general arrived in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling. Gyssling was a member of the Nazi Party and he worked hard to convince American studio executives not to make anti-German or anti-Nazi pictures. He continually invoked Section Fifteen of the German quota regulations against the studios, telling them that if they made any pictures damaging to German prestige, then all of their product would subsequently be banned in Germany.

This chapter turns to Hitler’s final judgment category, “switched off,” but it does not examine the particular movies that Hitler stopped watching in his private screening room. Rather, the chapter is interested in something far more important: the films that Hollywood itself aborted in the troubled political climate of the 1930s. The single most important case of suppressed anti-fascism was the film version of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*, and what follows is a detailed account of the story behind that film. Significantly, this was also one of the only occasions in which Gyssling did not intervene in any way. The studio’s financial dealings with Germany and other nations lurked in the background, to be sure, but all the action for this case took place in America.

The suppression of *It Can’t Happen Here* has been shrouded in mystery since before the film even went into preproduction. This chapter draws on material from various archives – the MGM Scripts Collection at the University of Southern California; the Sidney Coe Howard Papers at the Bancroft Library; the Production Code Administration Collection at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; and the William H. Fineshriber Papers at the Archives of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia – to put together the pieces of an untold story and to reveal for the first time what really happened to *It Can’t Happen Here*.

Hitler was late. He had appointments with two foreign journalists at the Kaiserhof Hotel in Berlin and he was making them wait.<sup>2</sup> He despised such encounters with strangers. These people expected to meet a great orator, the future dictator of Germany, but for some reason they always emerged disappointed.<sup>3</sup>

He darted through the hotel lobby with his bodyguard and raced upstairs to his salon. He would see the Italian journalist first. For half an hour he spoke of his plans for a fascist alliance. Then it was time to meet Dorothy Thompson, an American journalist and wife of the famous novelist Sinclair Lewis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Lewis Says Hays Bans Film of Book,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Thompson, *“I Saw Hitler!”* Farrar & Rinehart, New York, 1932, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> For Hitler’s difficulties with personal encounters, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris*, Penguin, London, 1998, 93, 133, 281.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson, *“I Saw Hitler!”* 12-13.

As usual Hitler had requested the questions in advance so he was hardly surprised by her words. “When you come to power, as I take it you will,” she said, “what will you do for the working masses of Germany?”<sup>5</sup>

But Hitler did not know how to respond. He was searching for an idea, some kind of theme to set him in a trance, and he was having no success: “Not yet is the whole working class with us... we need a new spirit... Marxism has undermined the masses... rebirth in a new ideology... not workers, not employers, not socialists, not Catholics... but Germans!” Throughout the tirade he was looking off to a far corner of the room and banging his fist on the table, desperately working himself into a frenzy – all for nothing.<sup>6</sup>

Thompson proceeded to her next question. “When you come to power, will you abolish the constitution of the German Republic?”<sup>7</sup>

This time Hitler’s response was clearer, although his eyes were still searching for the crowd that was not there. “I will get into power legally,” he said, and then he started to scream. “I will abolish this parliament and the Weimar constitution afterward. I will found an authority-state, from the lowest cell to the highest instance; everywhere there will be responsibility and authority above, discipline and obedience below.”<sup>8</sup>

Thompson moved on to her final question. “What will you do for international disarmament, and how will you handle France?”<sup>9</sup>

On previous occasions Hitler had told his people of the need to rearm and then destroy France. But he was being more cautious with foreign correspondents these days. “When the German people are at last really unified, and secure in their own honor,” he replied, “I believe even France will respect us.”<sup>10</sup>

The interview was over. Thompson stood up, chatted briefly with one of the adjutants, and then she was gone.<sup>11</sup> Hitler went on with his regular activities.

A few months later the interview appeared in William Randolph Hearst’s *Cosmopolitan* magazine. It began as follows: “When I walked into Adolf Hitler’s salon, I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In less than fifty seconds I was sure I was not. It took just about that time to measure the startling insignificance of this man who has set the world agog.”<sup>12</sup>

Previous interviewers had provided transcripts of Hitler’s responses and some had even reflected on his strange manner. But none had thought as deeply about the contrast between his inner and outer selves, and none had ridiculed him to quite this extent:

He is formless, almost faceless, a man whose countenance is a caricature, a man whose framework seems cartilaginous, without bones. He is inconsequent and voluble, ill-poised, insecure. He is the very prototype of the Little Man. A lock of lank hair falls over an insignificant and slightly retreating forehead. The back head is shallow. The face is broad in the cheek-bones. The nose is large, but badly shaped and without character. His movements are awkward, almost undignified

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 16.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 6.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 18.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 6.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 20.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 17.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” *Hearst’s International-Cosmopolitan*, March 1932, 32.

and most un-martial. There is in his face no trace of any inner conflict or self-discipline...

There is something irritatingly refined about him. I bet he crooks his little finger when he drinks a cup of tea.<sup>13</sup>

Such a man, Thompson said, was not destined to become dictator of Germany. He simply would not get the votes. He might briefly serve as Chancellor if he formed a coalition with the Center Party, but ultimately he would be pushed aside. "Oh Adolf! Adolf!" Thompson wrote, "You will be out of luck!"<sup>14</sup>

Her prediction would later be called a "blunder," a "comico-terrible gaffe"<sup>15</sup> – but Hitler did not see it that way. For a full year following the article's publication he refused all interviews with American journalists.<sup>16</sup> Upon coming to power he set up a "Dorothy Thompson Emergency Squad" whose sole purpose was to translate every word she wrote. Rumors were circulating that he was planning to make an example of her as soon as he had the chance.<sup>17</sup>

In August 1934 Thompson was on her way to Germany to do a report on the political situation. She had made five such trips since the Nazis came to power, but this time was different: Hitler had just wiped out the dissident elements of his Party by murdering Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders on the Night of the Long Knives.<sup>18</sup> Sinclair Lewis became hysterical for his wife's safety and it required the whole evening to calm him.<sup>19</sup> But Thompson had no intention of abandoning her trip. She began by collecting information about the Nazis' recent coup attempt in Austria. She then crossed the border into Germany and drove past a youth camp whose motto – "WE WERE BORN TO DIE FOR GERMANY" – sent chills down her spine. She pressed down hard on the accelerator and eventually arrived in Berlin.<sup>20</sup>

Ten days passed without any notable incident occurring. Thompson spent the time interviewing witnesses to the Röhm purge and learning how indiscriminate the murders were. "Men didn't know why they were shot," one Storm Trooper told her under condition of anonymity. "[Hitler] never forgets anything or forgives it."<sup>21</sup> Shortly afterwards Thompson received a phone call in her hotel room from the porter downstairs. A member of the Secret Police was waiting to see her, and he presented her with a letter:

It has come to the attention of the authorities that you have recently again arrived in Germany.

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<sup>13</sup> Thompson, "I Saw Hitler!" 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, "I Saw Hitler!" 20-23, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1990, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Hans V. Kaltenborn, "An Interview with Hitler, August 17, 1932," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer 1967, 284.

<sup>17</sup> Bella Fromm, *Blood and Banquets: A Berlin Social Diary*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1942, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick T. Birchall, "Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich for 'Slur' on Hitler," *New York Times*, August 26, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life*, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1961, 601.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, "Good-By to Germany," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, December 1934, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, "Good-By to Germany," 49, 48.

In view of your numerous anti-German publications in the American press, the German authorities, for reasons of national self-respect, are unable to extend to you a further right of hospitality.

To avoid formal expulsion you are therefore requested to interrupt your sojourn in Germany as quickly as possible and leave the domain of the Reich immediately.<sup>22</sup>

Thompson called the United States Ambassador, William E. Dodd, and asked him to investigate the matter. The Ambassador discovered that Thompson was being expelled primarily for the Hitler interview and also for some articles she had written on the Jewish question. If she did not leave within twenty-four hours she would be officially escorted to the border. She could not appeal the decision because it came from “the highest authority in the Reich.”<sup>23</sup>

At first Thompson was tempted to wait for the actual expulsion order to see whether she would be forced out of Germany.<sup>24</sup> The Ambassador urged strenuously against this, however, so she packed her things and left her room. A group of reporters were waiting for her downstairs. She read them a hastily prepared statement in which she explained that she had never written anything out of malice towards Germany. The Hitler interview was published long before the Nazis came to power, so it could not possibly have been construed as anti-German. And the reports that appeared in Jewish newspapers in the United States were articles of fact, not opinion. In them she had simply described the effects of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic policies.<sup>25</sup>

Thompson proceeded to the Friedrichstrasse station where virtually all the British and American correspondents in Berlin had gathered to see her off. They presented her with a bunch of American Beauty roses as a token of their esteem and affection, and she boarded the second-class sleeper train to Paris. She encountered no difficulties with the Germans on board, and only when she crossed the border did anyone treat her with suspicion. A French customs official looked at her large collection of newspapers, which included many editions of *Völkischer Beobachter* and *Der Angriff*, and he seemed to be wondering whether she was a Nazi agent.<sup>26</sup>

Thompson’s account of her treatment by the German authorities later appeared in the *New York Times*. “My offence was to think that Hitler is just an ordinary man, after all,” she wrote. “That is a crime against the reigning cult in Germany, which says Mr. Hitler is a Messiah sent by God to save the German people – an old Jewish idea. To question this mystic mission is so heinous that, if you are a German, you can be sent to jail. I, fortunately, am an American, so I merely was sent to Paris. Worse things can happen to one.”<sup>27</sup>

Thompson was already a well-known critic of Hitler. Now she became a national celebrity. For the remainder of the 1930s she was the leading American agitator against the Nazis. Her regular column “On the Record” appeared in hundreds of newspapers and

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson, “Good-By to Germany,” 51; Birchall, “Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich.”

<sup>23</sup> Birchall, “Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich.”

<sup>24</sup> “Dorothy Thompson Home from Berlin,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1934.

<sup>25</sup> Birchall, “Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich”; “Germany: Little Man,” *Time*, September 3, 1934.

<sup>26</sup> Birchall, “Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich”; “Dorothy Thompson Tells of Nazi Ban,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1934.

<sup>27</sup> “Dorothy Thompson Tells of Nazi Ban.”

reached millions of people. One study estimated that three-fifths of the 250,000 words she wrote in a two-year period were devoted to attacking the Hitler regime.<sup>28</sup>

Her rise to prominence had troubling effects on her marriage, however.<sup>29</sup> Various socialites would visit her household to hear about her experience in Germany, and Sinclair Lewis resented the intrusion. He would walk into the room and see them all huddled around her and he would ask, “Is she talking about *It*?” Then he would walk out again. “You with your important little lectures, you with your brilliant people,” he would complain afterwards. “*You* want to talk about foreign politics, which *I* am too ignorant to understand.” More than once he was heard to remark, “If I ever divorce Dorothy, I’ll name Adolf Hitler as co-respondent.”<sup>30</sup>

But he was more interested in the political gatherings than he was letting on. And one topic of conversation particularly fascinated him. Back when Thompson had published the Hitler interview, she had included a sentence that had played on his mind ever since:

If you want to gauge the strength of the Hitler movement, imagine that in America, an orator with the tongue of the late Mr. Bryan and the histrionic powers of Aimee McPherson, combined with the publicity gifts of Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee should manage to unite all the farmers with all the white collar unemployed, all the people with salaries under \$3000 a year who have lost their savings in bank collapses and the stock market and are being pressed for payments on the icebox and the radio, the louder evangelical preachers, the American Legion, the D.A.R., the Ku Klux Klan, the W.C.T.U., Matthew Woll, Senator Borah, and Henry Ford – imagine that, and you will have some idea of what the Hitler movement in Germany means.<sup>31</sup>

Now Sinclair Lewis was not particularly interested in “what the Hitler movement in Germany means.” He was, however, looking for a subject for his next book. Throughout the previous decade – in which he had written numerous bestsellers including *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), *Elmer Gantry* (1927), and *Dodsworth* (1929) – critics had often pointed out that he had an uncanny ability to seize on a popular mood and give it definition. “If *Main Street* lives,” one critic had shrewdly observed, “it will probably be not as a novel but as an incident in American life.” Since winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930, Lewis had struggled to find an idea with as much potency as the ones that had animated him in the past. This one was suddenly starting to seem more promising.<sup>32</sup>

By 1935 the sentence from Thompson’s book had acquired new meaning in American life. There was the impression in various circles that the democratic system of government was failing. And certain political figures had arisen whose actions were being interpreted as examples of domestic fascism. If the implication of Thompson’s long

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<sup>28</sup> Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 204, 358, 232, 280.

<sup>29</sup> Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 242.

<sup>30</sup> Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 165-166; Vincent Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1963, 263.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, “*I Saw Hitler!*” 34-35.

<sup>32</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 355, 268, 560.

list of names was that there were already fascist tendencies in the United States, now some people were saying that the United States could actually turn fascist.<sup>33</sup>

By far the most frequently cited example of a fascist American leader was Huey Long, the Governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932. Long's record of achievements was actually quite impressive: he provided free textbooks to Louisiana students, he vastly improved the state's decrepit highway system, and he revised the tax codes to increase the burden on the wealthy gas and oil interests. But Long's methods were questionable. He took jobs away from anyone who opposed him. He treated the passing of legislation as a mere formality. Even some of his most loyal supporters considered him a virtual dictator.<sup>34</sup> In Long's own words, "First you must come into power – POWER – and then you can do things."<sup>35</sup>

In 1930 Long became a United States Senator, and in 1934 he announced his Share Our Wealth Plan. He proposed to give every needy family \$5,000 per year and to limit the fortunes of the wealthiest citizens to a few million dollars.<sup>36</sup> To achieve this goal he founded the Share Our Wealth Society, and by February 1935 the Society included 27,000 local branches and more than 7.5 million members. Long had by this stage shaken off his allegiance to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and was seriously considering running for president in the 1936 election on a third-party ticket.<sup>37</sup>

It was clear, however, that if Long became president of the United States, and if he were indeed a fascist, he would not be an exact replica of the dictators of Europe. One commentator writing in early 1935 claimed that the difference lay in his casual and even humorous ruling style: "Huey in his green pajamas, holding court in his bedroom is the natural man... Hitler looks through a solitary listener and goes into a near-trance, forgetting everything except the flow of ideas which pours from him. Huey does not ignore his listener; he stands over him shouting, prods him with a gesticulating finger, thumps him with an articulate fist." In other words – this commentator was saying – Huey Long was a fascist of the American variety.<sup>38</sup>

No author was better qualified to handle such material than Sinclair Lewis. He combined first-hand knowledge of the situation in Germany with his own perceptions into American life. In the summer of 1935 he followed his wife's instructions from years earlier and imagined what an American dictatorship would look like. His old work routine returned with a vengeance. When some friends invited him to their house for a quick visit, Thompson replied that her husband was "working nine hours a day on a novel which he is writing all in one flood and to the exclusion of everything else." By mid-July he had completed the first draft, and in early August his publishers sent the final product to the printers.<sup>39</sup>

*It Can't Happen Here* was without any doubt the most important anti-fascist work to appear in the United States in the 1930s. Lewis envisioned fascism overtaking not just the system of government but the mindset of the entire country. "For the first time in

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism*, Books for Libraries Press, New York, 1935.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*, Knopf, New York, 1982, 24, 26, 28.

<sup>35</sup> T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long*, Knopf, New York, 1970, 750.

<sup>36</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 71-73.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Huey Long*, 700-701, 818.

<sup>38</sup> Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 608-609.

America, except during the Civil War and the World War,” he wrote, “people were afraid to say whatever came to their tongues.” He probed deeply into this world without ever losing his sense of humor to arrive at sentences that were chillingly convincing. “Under a tyranny,” he claimed, “most friends are a liability.”<sup>40</sup>

His novel recounted the rise of Berzelius (or “Buzz”) Windrip, a Democratic senator who stole the 1936 presidential nomination from Roosevelt and became the first American dictator. Windrip adopted many of Hitler’s methods – recruiting uniformed troops to terrorize opponents, taking control of the press, creating an official salute – but he persistently denied that he was a fascist, and he did so with such good humor that everyone believed him. Even the hero of the book, a sixty-year-old newspaperman from a small town in Vermont, briefly succumbed to Windrip’s charms before risking his life in an effort to destroy the dictatorship.

The plot of *It Can’t Happen Here* was relatively straightforward. The politics were not. Up to this point, the loudest warnings against an imminent fascism in America – and the harshest attacks on Huey Long – had come from the left. *The Nation* ran numerous articles on homegrown fascism in early 1935, and later in the year Carey McWilliams published a pamphlet on anti-Semitic organizations in Los Angeles.<sup>41</sup> But Sinclair Lewis had no intention whatsoever of uniting with the left out of a common anti-fascist sympathy. Indeed, Lewis’s whole motivation for writing *It Can’t Happen Here* was uncertain. He may have genuinely believed that Long was the American version of Hitler, or he may simply have despised Long for the same reason that intellectual elites despise all populist leaders – out of a need to assert superiority. Whatever the case, he lampooned everyone in the book – Huey Long, the Communists, and liberals for thinking “It can’t happen here” in the first place – only to return to a passionate defense of traditional American values at the end. “More and more as I think about history,” his hero pondered, “I am convinced that everything that is worth while in the world has been accomplished by the free, inquiring, critical spirit, and that the preservation of this spirit is more important than any social system whatsoever. But the men of ritual and the men of barbarism are capable of shutting up the men of science and of silencing them forever.”<sup>42</sup>

With the publication of *It Can’t Happen Here*, a group of writers affiliated with the Communist Party tried to win Sinclair Lewis over to their cause. They invited him to a dinner where half-a-dozen members praised his book profusely. Lewis stood up to respond. “Boys, I love you all,” he said, “and a writer loves to have his latest book praised. But let me tell you, it isn’t a very good book – I’ve done better books – and, furthermore, I don’t believe any of you have *read* the book; if you had, you would have seen I was telling all of you to go to hell. Now, boys, join arms; let’s all of us stand up and sing, ‘Stand Up, Stand Up, for Jesus.’” And as a couple of the guests rushed out of the room, the others did just as Lewis said.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, Signet Classics, New York 1970 [1935], 218, 203.

<sup>41</sup> Most of the articles from *Nation* are reprinted in Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism*. Carey McWilliams’ pamphlet “It CAN Happen Here: Active Anti-Semitism in America” is available at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, 359.

<sup>43</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s*, The Viking Press, New York, 1980 [1964], 296-7.

Lewis of course knew why the Communists were trying to get him on board: his book had been a big success. The trade sales in the United States amounted to more than 94,000 copies and the total sales to more than 320,000.<sup>44</sup> Lewis would never attain such figures again. And yet there was a definite limit to his achievement. Ninety-four thousand copies sold, while highly respectable, hardly made *It Can't Happen Here* popular on a mass scale. If his story were to have any real impact, he would need to reach a much wider audience.

And here was where Dorothy Thompson's perceptions became especially relevant. Unlike other critics, she had actually learned from Hitler. She had been profoundly influenced by his whole approach towards propaganda. He had said in *Mein Kampf* that "One must judge a public speech not by the sense it makes to scientists who read it the next day, but by the effect which it has on the masses," and she agreed. In her famous interview, she announced that she had no intention of writing about Hitler in the manner of a meticulous historian. The times were moving too fast to allow for such a luxury. Rather, she said, "Ours is the age of the reporter."<sup>45</sup>

In a slightly expanded, book-length version of the Hitler interview which Thompson released a few months later, she said something even more revealing. She included dozens of documentary photographs that had not appeared in the original article, and once again she quoted Hitler to justify her decision.

Many would rather look at a presentation of a case in pictures, than to read a long text. The Picture clarifies everything immediately and often does all that long and boresome reading can accomplish.<sup>46</sup>

Thompson was very consciously turning Hitler's own methods against him: first using unpretentious writing to make fun of him, then using photos to enforce her arguments. There was just one further step she could take. In a sentence that had appeared on the same page of *Mein Kampf* as the above passage, and that Thompson had intentionally left out of her book, Hitler had mentioned the most powerful weapon of all. "The picture in all its forms up to the film," he had said, "has greater possibilities."<sup>47</sup>

Thompson undoubtedly brought these statements to her husband's attention, for the fictional dictator in *It Can't Happen Here*, Buzz Windrip, said many of the same things. "I try to make my speech as simple and direct as those of the Child Jesus talking to the Doctor in the Temple," Windrip said at one point. And in what was essentially an Americanized version of a sentence from *Mein Kampf*, Windrip declared "You can win over folks to your point of view much better in the evening, when they are tired out from work and not so likely to resist you."<sup>48</sup> The same was true for a movie, Hitler had added – a comparison Dorothy Thompson knew well.<sup>49</sup>

Now all of this might not have amounted to much under ordinary circumstances. Thompson might simply have been alerting her husband to these passages to round out

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<sup>44</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 610.

<sup>45</sup> Thompson, "I Saw Hitler!" 29, vi.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, "I Saw Hitler!" vii.

<sup>47</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1943 [1925], 470.

<sup>48</sup> Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, 49, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 474.



his portrayal of an American dictator. Her references to the power of the picture in her own work might have been just another joke at Hitler's expense. But a single fact casts her contribution in a different light. By the time Sinclair Lewis's novel was published in October 1935, MGM already owned the rights for the screen.<sup>50</sup> From the very start, it seems, *It Can't Happen Here* had been envisioned as a movie.

And not just any movie: MGM planned to assemble some of its greatest talent to make one of the most controversial productions of the decade. Consciously or unconsciously, the company was adopting Hitler's own methods and turning them against him. *It Can't Happen Here* was going to be the first piece of anti-fascist propaganda to reach a mass audience.

MGM spared no expense. Company executives asked the highest-paid screenwriter in Hollywood, Sidney Howard, to do the script. Howard was the obvious choice. He had won the Academy Award for Best Screenplay for his adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, and his stage version of *Dodsworth* was still playing all around the country.<sup>51</sup> MGM gave him an advance copy of *It Can't Happen Here* the novel, and offered him \$22,500 plus \$3,000 per week to write the script.<sup>52</sup> This was a colossal sum, and Howard badly needed to pay off the mortgage on his farm.<sup>53</sup> It did not take him long to accept.

Still, the job was not going to be an easy one. Howard was a tireless worker and a perfectionist, and Lewis's book, for all its merits, was long, rambling, and disorganized. Above all – and this was a criticism of Lewis's work in general – his characters had no real depth. "I loathe this stinking, synthetic, phony piece of tripe that Lewis has written," Howard told his wife early in the process.<sup>54</sup> "It isn't easy to write about marionettes and there isn't room, with all this synthetic material, to make people of Lewis's marionettes... As I said yesterday to my director: anybody can put two marionettes into bed together but when they get there nothing happens and you have to make the little marionettes yourself."<sup>55</sup> Howard was considered an expert at adapting material for the screen, and his method – which he termed "dramatizing by equivalent" – often led him to invent rather than replicate scenes to achieve the novelist's intended effect.<sup>56</sup> The problem in this case was that he was not quite sure what Lewis's intended effect was, despite the fact that Lewis was frequently available for consultation.

Nevertheless Howard believed in the project. "Almost for the first time," he told one executive, MGM was going "to carry the American screen into the field of living controversy."<sup>57</sup> The sheer magnitude of the project inspired him. He reread *It Can't Happen Here* and he started to have some ideas. The novel, he thought, was a chronicle of protest against an imaginary political situation. Its hero, Doremus Jessup, courageously

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<sup>50</sup> Sidney Howard to Ann Watkins, October 18, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15, Bancroft Library.

<sup>51</sup> Sidney Howard White, *Sidney Howard*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1977, 30, 31-32.

<sup>52</sup> Howard to Ann Watkins, October 18, 1935.

<sup>53</sup> Howard to Polly Damrosch, January 21, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>54</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 21, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>55</sup> Howard to Damrosch, January 9, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis and Howard, *Sinclair Lewis's Dodsworth: Dramatized by Sidney Howard*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1933, xiii.

<sup>57</sup> Howard to Robert Rubin, February 14, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

defended American institutions from the tyranny of fascism.<sup>58</sup> This part he found plausible enough. But he was unsure how to convince American audiences that they would ever have surrendered their rights to a demagogue in the first place. He could not accept Lewis's idea "that a charlatan who is nothing but a charlatan could get to be president of this country." The characterization simply seemed wrong. Finally, after much deliberation, he came up with a solution. The fictional president Buzz Windrip could be a convincing figure if he actually believed what he was saying. His sincerity might put him over with the people.<sup>59</sup>

The film was starting to take shape in Howard's mind. He envisioned a vehicle for two stars, both of whom were key players at MGM. Lionel Barrymore – an instantly recognizable, middle-aged actor with a warbly voice full of conviction – was perfectly suited to play Doremus Jessup. And Wallace Beery – a huge, likeable villain who was so honest and ordinary that he probably could have been an American dictator – would play Buzz Windrip. The film would shift between the experiences of these two men through a sustained technical device: the scenes involving Jessup would be shot normally, while the scenes involving Windrip would be shot like newsreels. The result would be a distinctive picture combining human drama with a believable account of the new political conditions.<sup>60</sup>

That was the idea, anyway. But as Howard sat down to write, he found that he was having trouble getting started. The material was more challenging than anything he had done before, and it did not help that his office at MGM was noisy and unpleasant.<sup>61</sup> "I was an idiot ever to take this assignment," he told his wife.<sup>62</sup> "The crux is to get 'It Can't Happen Here' into production and that cannot happen here or anywhere until I have completed... the script."<sup>63</sup> He was getting frustrated. He snapped at his wife whenever she forgot to call him.<sup>64</sup> Then, one day in late November, something clicked. He had been planning to begin the picture with the largest possible close-up of Buzz Windrip's face ("how fine," he thought, "if it is also Wallace Beery's face") and to follow this with a long, drawn-out political campaign.<sup>65</sup> But he changed his mind. He threw out everything he had and started again.

The setting was Fort Beulah, a small town in Vermont. A family was out on picnic on a sunny afternoon. Everyone was enjoying themselves, and the view was spectacular, and at just the right moment the father, Doremus Jessup, crept back into his car and switched on the radio. The presidential candidate for one of the major parties was screaming over the airwaves: "I, Buzz Windrip, am the only true, genuine and permanent

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<sup>58</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, October 28, 1935, MGM Scripts Collection, Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Howard to Sam Marx, October 23, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Howard to Lucien Hubbard, December 5, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>60</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here*, 1-3; Howard, Preliminary notes for a motion picture treatment of *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, undated, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, 1-3.

<sup>61</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 21, 1935; Howard to Helen Louise Coe Howard, January 26, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>62</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 30, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>63</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 31, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>64</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 30, 1935.

<sup>65</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here*, 4; Howard, Preliminary notes for a motion picture treatment of *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, 3.

remedy! And they can throw all the legal and political switches they've got on the line! I'm one locomotive they can't derail or sidetrack!" The crowd responded with an ovation, but Doremus only shuddered.<sup>66</sup>

The scene shifted to Washington. The men behind the Windrip campaign, Lee Sarason and Dewey Haik, were obvious bad guys – ruthless schemers who preached the wonders of fascism whenever they were alone. But Windrip himself was “not at all a bad fellow,” and to prove it he told everyone with complete sincerity that he was on their side. He was a friend of business and he was a friend of labor; he loved immigrants and he loved “hundred per cent Americans”; he was in favor of disarmament and he was in favor of rearmament. And one fateful night when the country was drunk on his promises, he was elected President of the United States. All around the country, people were celebrating. Nobody seemed to be wondering what the Minute Men – Windrip's paramilitary organization – would do now that he was in power. Even in the small editorial office of the *Daily Informer* in Fort Beulah, Doremus Jessup was not overly worried. “There's no harm in 'em,” he told himself. “Not 'way up here in Vermont...”<sup>67</sup>

A few days later Windrip moved into the White House. He entered his new study, removed his shoes and socks, and wiggled his toes. “Bet this was the first thing Lincoln did when he got here,” he said. Meanwhile Sarason and Haik were taking care of more important matters. They armed the Minute Men, they abolished the Supreme Court, and they suspended Congress. When a mob surrounded the White House in protest, they convinced Windrip to give a terrible order to his Minute Men. “Get that mob, boys,” Windrip yelled. “Help me to help you save America!” Journalists condemned the gunning down of innocent civilians, but once again Sarason and Haik knew what to do. They took control of the press; they announced that the mob had been composed of dangerous radicals; and they adopted a series of measures to fight the “Communist plot.” Jobs were taken away from foreigners. Concentration camps were created for anyone who opposed the new regime.<sup>68</sup> (“The brutality of the concentration camp,” Howard noted in his treatment, “is so much a part of today's world history that it requires full development in this picture.”)<sup>69</sup>

Then the setting changed again, this time to a movie theater somewhere in America. A title flickered on the screen – “Official Government Newsreel No. 1” – and Windrip appeared. “Well folks,” he said, “we've been turning our minds to making your government more efficient and we're blest if we see any use keeping all these separate states.” He pointed to a map which revealed that the country was now divided into seven new provinces, and Lee Sarason walked onto the screen. “Subject to your approval, Mr. President, I've taken the liberty of revising the national flag. You will see that the now antiquated stars have given way to a steering wheel symbolizing your guidance of the ship of state.” Windrip looked on in approval, and a new title appeared: “And those of you who've been wondering about that five thousand a year you were promised...” The newsreel continued. More majestic music. More celebration.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here: Temporary Complete*, January 22, 1936, MGM Scripts Collection, Cinematic Arts Library, 1-17.

<sup>67</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 18-32.

<sup>68</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 40-57

<sup>69</sup> Howard, Preliminary notes for a motion picture treatment of *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 93-95.

The scene shifted back to Doremus Jessup and the music turned somber. As he wandered the streets of his home town on a sad autumn afternoon, he saw nothing less than the end of America. Women were waiting in illegal breadlines; Minute Men were spying on their friends and on each other; immigrants had all been taken away. A book burning was in progress and a little girl was crying because she had lost her copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. Doremus made sure not to console her because he knew that such actions would be reported to the authorities. He just turned around and headed for home. As he walked through his front door, his eight-year-old grandson gave him the Windrip salute. His daughter looked on and mumbled something about the horror of bringing children into this world.<sup>71</sup>

And then came the turning point. The unsuccessful presidential candidate from the previous election, Walt Trowbridge, escaped to Canada and began a movement to restore democracy in America. Trowbridge had not appeared much in the picture up to this point ("Old Americanism is dismally undramatic," Howard had noted)<sup>72</sup> but now Trowbridge was back, and he asked Doremus to be his man in Vermont. The sixty-year-old newspaper editor saw the error of his ways. "All us lazy-minded Doremuses are responsible," he declared. "I used to think that wars and depressions were brought on by diplomats and bankers. They were brought on by us liberals... because we did nothing to stop 'em."<sup>73</sup> (Howard may have been dramatizing the book's message here, or he may simply have been inserting his own feelings. A few days earlier he had admitted to a journalist that he was including no criticism of William Randolph Hearst in the picture. He felt guilty and wrote in his diary, "I disappointed [the journalist] a good deal being only a liberal. I suppose that a liberal really *is* a feeble article. He is a man who admits that he's sick but refuses to see the doctor.")<sup>74</sup>

In any case, Doremus was awake now. He spent all his time writing and editing an underground newspaper that exposed the horrors of the Windrip regime. He worked tirelessly, and one night his family asked him to read something aloud. As he began to speak, the crimes of the Minute Men came to life on the screen. One horrific image dissolved into another. And as more and more people became aware of what was really going on throughout the land – and as they recognized that the official newsreels were full of lies – the opposition to the Windrip government steadily grew.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile Sarason and Haik were getting worried. They turned all their attention to figuring out who was responsible for publishing the damaging newspaper. It did not take long. One afternoon a truck pulled up in front of Doremus's house, and Minute Men hauled him off to a concentration camp. The scenes that followed were the sparsest of the entire picture. The camp was a converted old boys' school; barbed wire sealed off the area; "Hurrah for the Chief" was written on the walls. Doremus passed through two or three gates and arrived in a solitary cell where he experienced terrible physical pain.<sup>76</sup> ("A little torture goes a long way on the screen," Howard wrote.)<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 95-103.

<sup>72</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 65-75, 103-109, 85-86.

<sup>74</sup> Howard, Diary Entry, January 13, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Carton 1.

<sup>75</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 110-114.

<sup>76</sup> Howard, *It Can't Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 115-134.

<sup>77</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here*, 31.

After several months, Doremus was close to death. The guards called him “a living corpse. Just like the American spirit.” Only when he had almost given up hope did the country’s fortunes start to change. Doremus escaped from the camp. His daughter Mary, a trained pilot, flew head-on into Lee Sarason’s plane. Dewey Haik assassinated Windrip and became the new American dictator. An organized resistance to the fascist tyranny emerged, and the United States became embroiled in a civil war.<sup>78</sup> (“Lewis has written our picture for us here, almost shot for shot, and at greater length than we can use.”)<sup>79</sup>

And then, one hot day, an old truck inscribed “Dr. Dobb’s Famous Remedies” was pulled over at the side of the road, and thirty Minute Men on motorcycles were passing by. When they were out of sight, Dr. Dobbs – or, as it turned out, Doremus Jessup – got back in his truck and drove to a local farmyard. He gave machine guns and ammunition to a group of farmers, and they gave him shelter for the night. The next thing he knew, he was dreaming about the family picnic from the beginning of the movie, and his wife was calling out to him – but the noise turned out to be one of the farmers telling him that the Minute Men were on their way back, so Doremus lit a cigarette and got ready to leave. The farmer started whistling the verse of a well-known Union song (“John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave”) and as Doremus drove off he sang, “But his soul goes marching on!” The music rose to full volume – the film ended – and America was still up for grabs.<sup>80</sup>

Howard stopped writing. He looked over the script. He felt almost elated.<sup>81</sup> It was, in his words, “the toughest job I have ever done in my life.”<sup>82</sup> He sent a copy to Sinclair Lewis with the usual modesty (“I don’t know why you should want to read this script. I don’t know how anyone can ever read a motion picture script... If you do look through it and feel like making any notes requesting either cuts or additions, you may be sure that your observations will receive all possible attention.”)<sup>83</sup> One week later Lewis replied: “I have read it word for word. I have the greatest admiration for it and had a great deal of excitement out of reading it.” Lewis offered just a few suggestions for the ending of the picture, which Howard discarded immediately.<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, following normal practice, MGM sent a preliminary copy of Howard’s script to the Hays Office for inspection. The Hays Office was an organization appointed by the studios to regulate and represent the industry, and ever since July 1934, when Hays had put Joseph Breen in charge of the enforcement of the Production Code, the Office’s censorship recommendations had become increasingly severe. Breen applied the Code in an obsessive manner, and most of the time, although certainly not always, the studios followed his advice.

In the case of *It Can’t Happen Here*, Breen had a different reaction. The Production Code dealt mostly with such issues as sex, foul language, and violence, and Breen’s main problem with the script was political. He therefore admitted that *It Can’t Happen Here* was more-or-less acceptable under the provisions of the Code, and he took

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<sup>78</sup> Howard, *It Can’t Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 135-177.

<sup>79</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can’t Happen Here*, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Howard, *It Can’t Happen Here*, January 22, 1936, 178-184.

<sup>81</sup> Howard to Damrosch, December 19, 1935, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>82</sup> Howard to Damrosch, January 9, 1936.

<sup>83</sup> Howard to Lewis, January 23, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>84</sup> Lewis to Howard, February 2, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 5.

the unusual step of referring the matter back to Hays. He explained that he had two major concerns with the proposed picture. First, he said, “it is hardly more than a story portraying the Hitlerization of the United States of America. It is an attempt to bring home to American citizens, that which is transpiring in Germany today.” Breen wondered whether as a matter of policy the American film industry should be willing to sponsor a picture of this kind. Second, he was worried that *It Can’t Happen Here* would have a damaging impact on Hollywood’s foreign markets. In this connection he did not even mention Germany, a relatively small market that would obviously be affected. He was much more concerned with the likely reactions of England and France – democratic nations that did not want to offend their fascist neighbors lest they plunge the world into another war.<sup>85</sup>

Breen then wrote to Louis B. Mayer to inform him that Hays was now in charge of the case.<sup>86</sup> Several weeks passed and Mayer heard nothing from Hays – so Mayer did nothing himself. *It Can’t Happen Here* went straight into pre-production. Sets were built; costumes were designed; casting decisions were made.<sup>87</sup> Lionel Barrymore grew a beard and was looking more like Doremus Jessup every day.<sup>88</sup> Sidney Howard cut all of Barrymore’s romantic scenes from the picture, explaining to Sinclair Lewis that “Old actors who can play love scenes without being revolting on the screen are extremely hard to find. Turn to your novel scenes of Doremus and Lorinda in bed together and then try on your mind’s eye a photograph of any old actor you can think of and you will see that the picture is both ludicrous and unpleasant.”<sup>89</sup>

After making these and other revisions, Howard decided to remain in Los Angeles on MGM’s payroll. He had grown so attached to the project that he could not bear the thought of someone else making further changes to his script.<sup>90</sup> He was especially worried that Louis B. Mayer, a Republican, would attempt to turn *It Can’t Happen Here* into an anti-Roosevelt picture in anticipation of the upcoming election.<sup>91</sup> In the end, he accepted an offer from Samuel Goldwyn to adapt Sinclair Lewis’s *Dodsworth* for the screen just so that he could watch *It Can’t Happen Here* go into production.<sup>92</sup>

This turned out to be a good decision, for a couple of weeks before shooting was scheduled to begin, Breen sent a seven-page letter to Louis B. Mayer urging him not to make the picture at all. “This story is of so inflammatory a nature, and so filled with dangerous material that *only the greatest possible care* will save it from being rejected on all sides,” he wrote. He requested sixty specific cuts – an outrageous number – and he added that if Mayer actually made these cuts, and if the picture were then screened in certain places, this would be the worst possible result for MGM. *It Can’t Happen Here*

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph Breen to Will Hays, December 18, 1935, PCA File for *It Can’t Happen Here*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills.

<sup>86</sup> Breen to Louis B. Mayer, December 18, 1935, PCA File for *It Can’t Happen Here*.

<sup>87</sup> Howard to Damrosch, January 9, 1936.

<sup>88</sup> Howard to Damrosch, January 19, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>89</sup> Howard to Lewis, January 23, 1936.

<sup>90</sup> Howard to Helen Louise Coe Howard, January 26, 1936.

<sup>91</sup> Howard to Lewis, January 23, 1936; Howard to Luise Sillcox, January 23, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Lewis to Howard, February 3, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 5.

<sup>92</sup> Howard to Helen Louise Coe Howard, January 26, 1936; Howard to Harold Freeman, February 11, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

would be subjected to “the most minute criticism on all sides,” Breen warned, and “this criticism may result in enormous difficulty to your studio.”<sup>93</sup>

Yet despite the harshness of Breen’s words, his warning was ultimately a hollow one. Six weeks earlier he had turned the entire matter over to Hays, asking whether industry policy should permit such a picture to be made – and Hays had not said no. Breen’s only remaining course of action was to cause difficulties for the studio by recommending a massive number of cuts. Even as he did this, he was forced to add the disclaimer: “The Production Code Administration has no responsibility from the policy angle... The judgment ventured herein is *not* to be construed as having any bearing whatsoever on this policy angle.”<sup>94</sup>

Upon receiving Breen’s letter, MGM sought out legal advice. Alvin M. Asher of the firm Loeb, Walker and Loeb read Howard’s script and found thirteen instances that could potentially give rise to litigation or were simply in bad taste. “In most of the cases,” Asher wrote, “I think the possible grounds for objection can be removed with slight changes.”<sup>95</sup> Sam Eckman, the head of MGM in England, was more pessimistic. “Have read *Can’t Happen* script,” he cabled, “and if treatment reflects on dictatorship prevalent European countries will have extreme difficulty getting picture passed censors.” He went on to cite six problematic aspects of the script.<sup>96</sup>

Louis B. Mayer was told about all these objections and he decided to push ahead with *It Can’t Happen Here* anyway. “[The squawks] have been loud and agonized,” Sidney Howard wrote to a friend, “and I find myself amazed at the stubbornness with which Metro-Goldwyn persists in its determination to make the picture. The only instructions I have received from Mr. Louis B. Mayer were not to pull my punches. Explain his interest if you can. I can’t explain it.”<sup>97</sup> Howard spent two weeks going through all sixty of Breen’s recommendations and making the necessary changes, and on February 12, 1936, he noted in his diary, “Finally got the script in – and pray God it may not be longer than ever!”<sup>98</sup> Little did he know that just as he was putting the final touches on his script, someone else was taking much more effective action against the film.

The trouble began with a real estate agent in Philadelphia named Albert H. Lieberman. Like many real estate agents, Lieberman had read *It Can’t Happen Here*, and when he heard that Louis B. Mayer was turning the book into a motion picture, he panicked and wrote to his local rabbi: “It seems inconceivable to me that men of their intelligence do not understand that the making of a few more dollars for their Company out of a piece of business of this kind will result in repercussions that will make even them uncomfortable.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Breen to Mayer, January 31, 1936, PCA File for *It Can’t Happen Here*.

<sup>94</sup> Breen to Mayer, January 31, 1936.

<sup>95</sup> Alvin M. Asher to Robert E. Kopp, MGM Corp, February 4, 1936; Kopp to Hubbard, February 6, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Carton 17.

<sup>96</sup> Sam Eckman to Mayer, February 5, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Carton 17.

<sup>97</sup> Howard to Roger Baldwin, February 11, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>98</sup> Maurice Revnes to Hubbard, February 1, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 17; Howard, *It Can’t Happen Here: Temporary Complete*, February 12, 1936, MGM Scripts Collection, Cinematic Arts Library; Howard, Diary Entry, February 12, 1936.

<sup>99</sup> Albert H. Lieberman to William H. Fineshriber, February 5, 1936, Papers of Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Archives of Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel, Philadelphia, Folder B/6. Thanks to Rob Schwartz for tracking down these materials for me.

Under ordinary circumstances, Mr. Lieberman's letter would have had absolutely no impact on MGM's plans to make the picture. But Lieberman's rabbi happened to be William H. Fineshriber, the chair of the film committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and over the past few years this organization had been fighting the prevalent charge that the Jews were responsible for bringing immorality to the screen. In 1934 Fineshriber had joined with Protestant and Catholic leaders in a crusade to eradicate such immorality, and in early 1935 he had spent three weeks in Hollywood with some of the most powerful men in the business. By the end of his stay he had cultivated excellent relations with Louis B. Mayer and Will Hays, both of whom he had praised publicly for their efforts to reform motion pictures.<sup>100</sup>

On February 7, 1936, Fineshriber wrote to Mayer about *It Can't Happen Here*:

I have considered the problem at great length, and I am of the opinion that a film version of that story, howsoever interpreted and directed, will have anything but a beneficial effect upon the Jewish Problem. More and more, I am convinced that during these highly critical days for the Jewish people, here and elsewhere, we ought not to thrust the Jew and his problems too much into the limelight. I am quite sure that any interpretation of the story made by your firm will be forceful and certainly not seemingly detrimental to the Jewish cause, but there are times when to say nothing is better than to say something favorable.<sup>101</sup>

Fineshriber then wrote to Will Hays and made precisely the same point: "The only wise method to pursue in these days of virulent anti-Semitism is to have no picture in which the Jewish Problem is ventilated."<sup>102</sup> Finally Fineshriber wrote to another powerful executive at MGM, Nicholas Schenck: "I know full well that the picture, if produced by you, will be a splendid pro-Jewish and anti-Fascist interpretation, but I believe that now is the time for us to keep silent. If the story could be told without allowing the Jewish problem to be presented, it might not be so bad, but I can't, for the life of me, see how you can divorce the two."<sup>103</sup>

As it happened, MGM had gone to great lengths to divorce the two. Just one-and-a-half years earlier, the viciously anti-Semitic picture *The House of Rothschild* had played at theaters throughout the United States, and ever since then the Anti-Defamation League had been urging the studios not to refer to Jews in any of their productions. Sidney Howard had included numerous instances of anti-Semitism and persecution in his original treatment – many of which were taken straight out of Lewis's book – but MGM had ordered significant revisions.<sup>104</sup> In the new version, the Windrip government continued to persecute Jewish-looking characters and even hauled many of them off to

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<sup>100</sup> Felicia Herman, "American Jews and the Effort to Reform Motion Pictures, 1933-1935," *American Jewish Archives Journal*, LIII, 2001, 11-44.

<sup>101</sup> Fineshriber to Mayer, February 7, 1936, Papers of Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Folder B/6.

<sup>102</sup> Fineshriber to Hays, February 7, 1936, Papers of Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Folder B/6.

<sup>103</sup> Fineshriber to Nicholas Schenck, February 7, 1936, Papers of Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Folder B/6.

<sup>104</sup> Howard, Preliminary Notes for a motion picture from *It Can't Happen Here*, 10, 16, 18; Howard, *It Can't Happen Here: Temporary Complete*, December 16, 1935, MGM Scripts Collection, Cinematic Arts Library, 34-35, 45.



concentration camps, but these characters were never officially classified as Jews. Instead they were simply known as “foreigners.”<sup>105</sup>

Now Fineshriber was unaware that MGM had taken these steps and he may not even have known about the ADL’s efforts to remove Jewish characters from American movies. His primary aim had always been to fight the popular conception that the Jewish studio heads were polluting the country with immoral images. But somehow Fineshriber was able to achieve what the Hays Office could not. On February 13, 1936, just a few days after receiving Fineshriber’s letters, MGM announced the cancellation of its production of *It Can’t Happen Here*.<sup>106</sup> Hays immediately wrote to Fineshriber to say that he was pleased and to indicate that Louis B. Mayer would be in touch soon.<sup>107</sup>

While Fineshriber’s part in the cancellation of *It Can’t Happen Here* has always gone unrecognized, what remains puzzling is why his actions were so effective. Perhaps Mayer felt that he owed Fineshriber a favor after all the support he had received from the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Or perhaps he considered Fineshriber’s letter the final straw after so many calls to cancel the picture. Arthur Hornblow Jr. of Paramount, who certainly knew nothing about Fineshriber’s intervention, leaned towards this latter interpretation in a letter to Sidney Howard. He revealed that a meeting had taken place with important representatives from all the major studios just a day or two before the announcement, and he continued:

The only sense I can make thus far out of what happened at the meeting is that it was anticipated that England, being in a wishful state where peace with Italy and Germany is concerned, would ban the showing of a picture which portrayed any Anglo-Saxon, whether English or American, deriding or caricaturing Fascism. This was maintained by Eckman, head of Metro’s London office... To that you have only to add the racial inferiority felt by the influential Jewish picture magnates and you can account for the result obtained. I have reason to believe that Hays continually tells the industry that it is a “Jewish industry” and hence must be particularly careful not to offend. The seed of timidity is within them and spouts readily.<sup>108</sup>

The actual combination of factors that led Louis B. Mayer to cancel *It Can’t Happen Here* will probably never be known. The decision was shrouded in mystery from the day it was announced.<sup>109</sup> Even Sidney Howard was never given any satisfactory explanation. On February 14, just before leaving Hollywood to seek out solace with his family, the screenwriter expressed his confusion to MGM. “The only feeling that comes clear to me is that I have somehow cracked Metro-Goldwyn’s safe and made off with a lot of money to which I am not entitled,” he wrote. Then he edged closer to his true feelings: “One of the heartaches about writing for the pictures is that writers are not often allowed to maintain any continuous enthusiasm for them.”<sup>110</sup> Howard’s diary entry for the same day revealed an even more troubled state of mind: “Too upset by the fate of ‘IT

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<sup>105</sup> Howard to Lewis, January 23, 1936.

<sup>106</sup> Howard to Lewis, February 13, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15.

<sup>107</sup> Hays to Fineshriber, February 14, 1936, Papers of Rabbi William H. Fineshriber, Folder B/6.

<sup>108</sup> Arthur Hornblow, Jr. to Howard, February 24, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 4.

<sup>109</sup> “Hollywood Tempest Breaks on ‘It Can’t Happen Here,’ *The Publishers’ Weekly*, February 22, 1936.

<sup>110</sup> Howard to Rubin, February 14, 1936.

CAN'T HAPPEN HERE' to make any sense at all. To Berkeley by the night train and an awful time catching it. Rain in sheets and streets in rivers."<sup>111</sup>

Sinclair Lewis had a different reaction. He knew all about the Hays Office's criticism of Howard's screenplay, and he naturally assumed that Hays had banned the picture himself. On February 15 he publicly lashed out at the so-called "movie czar":

The world is full today of Fascist propaganda. The Germans are making one pro-Fascist film after another, designed to show that Fascism is superior to liberal democracy...

But Mr. Hays actually says that a film cannot be made showing the horrors of fascism and extolling the advantages of liberal democracy because Hitler and Mussolini might ban other Hollywood films from their countries if we were so rash.

Democracy is certainly on the defensive when two European dictators, without opening their mouths or knowing anything about the issue, can shut down an American film causing a loss of \$200,000 to the producer. I wrote 'It Can't Happen Here,' but I begin to think it certainly can.<sup>112</sup>

Will Hays immediately denied all of Lewis's charges. He said that he was not in a position to ban the film and that MGM had acted alone.<sup>113</sup> Mayer agreed. "The picture was abandoned because it would cost too much," he said in an official statement. "If all this talk continues perhaps we will find it profitable to make the picture at once."<sup>114</sup>

Samuel Goldwyn also rushed to Hays' defense: "It is well known that the Hays organization does not ban pictures but cooperates with the producer while the picture is being made. The picture was withdrawn from production probably because of casting difficulties."<sup>115</sup>

Officially, of course, Sinclair Lewis had made a mistake. The Hays Office did not ban *It Can't Happen Here*, nor did it have the power to do so. But in every other respect, Lewis's statement was accurate. The Hays Office did urge MGM to cancel *It Can't Happen Here* even though no fascist nation had said a word against the picture. Indeed, if anything, Lewis did not go far enough in his attack, for Germany and Italy were not the only countries "making one pro-Fascist film after another." As the Nazis themselves admitted, the first company to produce a model fascist motion picture was MGM. In 1933, Louis B. Mayer and William Randolph Hearst had made *Gabriel over the White House*, a movie that showed an American president assume dictatorial powers and thereby solve all the world's problems. Ever since then, several of the other major Hollywood studios had also released pictures expressing dissatisfaction with the slowness and inefficiency of the democratic form of government.

But as Sinclair Lewis pointed out, the opposite – a film advocating liberal democracy over fascism – could not be made in the United States at this time. And this fact highlighted the fascist tendencies at the center of American politics and culture more forcefully than Lewis ever could in a novel. After all, Lewis was not at all certain that the

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<sup>111</sup> Howard, Diary Entry, February 14, 1936.

<sup>112</sup> "Lewis Says Hays Bans Film of Book."

<sup>113</sup> "Hays Denies Order to Ban Lewis Film," *New York Times*, February 18, 1936.

<sup>114</sup> "The Nation," *New York Times*, February 23, 1936.

<sup>115</sup> "Denies Film Was Banned," *New York Times*, February 20, 1936.

United States was headed for dictatorship when he wrote *It Can't Happen Here*. Even Dorothy Thompson told him, "I really think you should consider making it an uproarious satire. I don't believe we *could* make fascism."<sup>116</sup> Thompson had just interviewed Huey Long, who provided the inspiration for Buzz Windrip in the novel, and while she certainly believed that Long was dangerous, she also knew that he was radically different from Hitler.<sup>117</sup> Long showed little respect for the institutions of democracy while he was Governor of Louisiana, but he never sought to establish a totalitarian regime. He organized a campaign against the powerful moneyed interests, but he never made a scapegoat out of any religious or racial minority. The concept of a collective national destiny organized around submission to an all-knowing leader was entirely absent from Long's vision.<sup>118</sup>

There was another reason why Long could never have become a fascist dictator: on September 7, 1935, he was shot outside the State Capitol in New Orleans, and twenty-four hours later he was dead. Sinclair Lewis had just sent his manuscript to the publishers at the time, and he was forced to make a few last-minute changes as a result.<sup>119</sup> But he knew as well as anybody that the event had profound implications for his book. With Long out of the picture, there was no longer any obvious figure threatening to bring fascism to the United States. *It Can't Happen Here* had turned from an urgent warning to a cautionary tale overnight.

And yet five months later, with Long all but forgotten, with Lewis's book sales in the hundreds of thousands, and with Howard's screenplay finally completed, the most powerful men in Hollywood decided in a closed meeting that they could not film a purely imaginary portrayal of fascism in America. The final sentence of Sinclair Lewis's statement to the press was more than just a quip. He was saying that while his book was hypothetical at best, the decision to cancel the movie had actually happened. The authorities had deemed it impermissible to screen a warning about the fragility of the democratic system of government to the American people. And it was no coincidence that immediately afterwards, representatives from the German and Italian governments had come forward to lend MGM their support. The representatives announced that they were pleased that *It Can't Happen Here* was not being turned into a movie, and the German spokesman said that the United States had avoided an official protest from Berlin by arriving at the decision. He added that Sinclair Lewis was a "full-blooded Communist."<sup>120</sup>

The very same day, like any full-blooded Communist, Lewis seized on all the publicity to promote his book. "Read it and see for yourself!" proclaimed a massive advertisement in the major newspapers. "Hollywood can censor every motion picture theatre in the country, *but it cannot yet censor your bookseller*."<sup>121</sup> Six months later Lewis profited from the decision even further by accepting a commission from the Federal Theater of the Works Project Administration. His play version of *It Can't*

<sup>116</sup> Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street*, Random House, New York, 2002, 400.

<sup>117</sup> Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 400; Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 208.

<sup>118</sup> Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 276-283.

<sup>119</sup> Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis*, 407. "Lewis refers to Long several times in the novel – his customary way of setting apart public figures from characters who might be identified with them, thus avoiding legal complaints. The problem of Long's demise was solved by merely adding 'the late' to all allusions to him."

<sup>120</sup> "Berlin and Rome Hail 'Ban' on Lewis Film," *New York Times*, February 17, 1936.

<sup>121</sup> "It is Happening Here!" Advertisement, *New York Times*, February 17, 1936.

*Happen Here* opened simultaneously in eighteen cities across the United States on October 27, 1936, and it enjoyed an enormously successful run. Only the critics were disappointed, and with good reason: the play was a careless, unconvincing, diluted piece of work compared to Sidney Howard's magnificent screenplay.<sup>122</sup>

Over the next few years, many people tried to get their hands on that screenplay, but MGM owned the rights, and Howard did not want to give it to anybody anyway. He seemed to want to forget about the whole experience.<sup>123</sup> He wrote three or four more scripts for the studios, including *Gone with the Wind*, and then on August 24, 1939, the day after the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, Howard was crushed to death by a tractor on his farm in the Berkshires.<sup>124</sup> Dorothy Thompson wrote about the two events in her next column. She recalled something Howard had once told her – “The machine takes on a life of its own” – and she wrote, “Oh Sidney, it does. All over the world it is taking on a horrible life of its own. It is eating up words, Sidney. They go into it, good, clean, reasonable words, words meant for *communication*, and they come out in awful cries, like the groans of grinding machine parts, like the inhuman shrieks of locomotive sirens. Eja! Eja! Heil! Sieg Heil! Rot Front! Eja! Sieg Heil!” Then Thompson turned to something Howard had told her more recently:

“I want to get back to the farm,” you said, the last time we met. It was in Hollywood, and you looked tired and bored. “It gives me the feeling of doing something I am absolutely certain is good.”

But the machine took on a life of its own. You cranked it – it was in gear. Some one had put it in gear... The machine sprang forward, all by itself, without any human will at all, and crushed a man against a wall.

You could write a play about that, Sidney.

If the man had not been you.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis*, 623-625; Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here: A New Version*, Dramatists Play Service, New York, 1938.

<sup>123</sup> Breen to Vincent Hart, February 19, 1936, PCA File for *It Can't Happen Here*; Richard Aldrich to Howard, March 3, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 1; Howard to Aldrich, March 20, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Howard to Elmer Rice, March 28, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Harry Rather to Breen, April 8, 1937, PCA File for *It Can't Happen Here*; Howard to Theresa Helburn, May 19, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Tom Davin to Howard, May 20, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 6; Howard to Davin, May 26, 1936, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 15; Val Lewton to Breen, June 8, 1936, PCA File for *It Can't Happen Here*.

<sup>124</sup> “Sidney Howard Killed by Tractor on Estate: Playwright is Crushed in Berkshire Garage,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1939.

<sup>125</sup> Thompson, “On the Record: To Sidney Howard,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 28, 1939. The Bancroft Library holds the handwritten first draft of the obituary, and the crossings-out are even more revealing than the actual text. Madeleine Walker to Mrs. Howard, September 30, 1939, Sidney Coe Howard Papers, Box 8.

## Conclusion

From 1933 to 1940, the American studios collaborated with Nazi Germany in two distinct ways: they agreed not to attack the Nazis in any of their productions, and they eliminated Jewish characters from the screen entirely. For seven years they produced movies that were unobjectionable and sometimes even beneficial from the Nazi standpoint, and in return they were permitted to continue doing business with Germany.

Adolf Hitler was personally responsible for the whole arrangement. He organized riots against Universal's *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930 that sparked the first instances of collaboration between the German government and the American studios. He also watched Hollywood movies on a regular basis, and the categories he established for them – “good,” “bad,” and “switched off” – while seemingly mundane, accurately described the particular movies that were relevant to his regime. This dissertation has seized on Hitler's categories to examine the three types of movies that were most significant in Hollywood's relationship with the Nazis in the 1930s.

The good movies were the ones that supported the official propaganda of the Third Reich. Joseph Goebbels and other representatives of the Propaganda Ministry frequently complained that German filmmakers had not been able to create the kind of product that regularly came out of Hollywood – movies, they said, that promoted the leader principle in a funny, entertaining, and appealing way. These American productions were often awarded national prizes in Germany and were routinely screened to the Hitler Youth for educational purposes.

The bad movies were the ones that starred well-known Jewish actors. Here the Nazis were forced to make some major concessions to the studios, for they were well aware of the Jewish origins of most of the Hollywood executives. Instead of banning American movies outright in Germany, Propaganda Ministry officials came up with a “black list” containing the names of around 60 very famous, mostly Jewish Hollywood personalities. The American studios then worked hand in hand with the Propaganda Ministry to make sure that none of these figures would ever appear on the German screen.

Finally – and here the dissertation shifts from the impact of Hollywood movies in Germany to the impact of German politics on Hollywood – virtually all anti-Nazi productions in the 1930s were switched off. Whenever there were anti-fascist rumblings in Los Angeles, and executives proposed productions that cast the Nazis in an unfavorable light, the local German consul retaliated by threatening to ban all American films in Germany. The most important case by far was MGM's cancellation of *It Can't Happen Here* (1936), a movie showing fascism coming to America. Unlike all the other abandoned productions that were cancelled as a result of the German consul's intervention, however, *It Can't Happen Here* was cancelled at the request of a rabbi.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My research will reveal that the German consul general in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, intervened in a number of cases that are not covered in this dissertation. Gyssling wrote threatening letters to the cast and crew of *The Road Back* (1937), Universal's sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and terrorized the studio into eliminating anti-German scenes from the picture. The consul then worked closely with executives at MGM to cut out anti-Nazi sentiment from the final film in the trilogy, *Three Comrades* (1938). These three cases – *It Can't Happen Here*, *The Road Back*, and *Three Comrades* – set a precedent that applied to all potentially anti-fascist movies from the period.

The history of the American studios' dealings with the Nazis deeply revises Hollywood's reputation as a bastion of anti-fascism in this period. Up to now, historians and film scholars have focused too heavily on the patriotic war films of the 1940s to cast the studios in an almost heroic light.<sup>2</sup> The 1930s reveals a much more troubling story – one not of anti-fascism but of collaboration.

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<sup>2</sup> In early 1939, Warner Brothers – a smaller studio that had long been unable to operate successfully in Germany – proposed a new, controversial production entitled *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Executives at Paramount went to great lengths to convince Warner Brothers not to push ahead with the production, but Warner Brothers had nothing to lose, and in May 1939 the first anti-Nazi film was released in the United States. Within a year, four or five similar pictures appeared, and with America's entry into the Second World War on December 8, 1941, the Hollywood studios were definitely at war with Germany. Movies that attacked the Nazis were finally "switched on."

And yet while Hollywood's collaboration with Nazi Germany had come to an end, the legacy remained. The American studios released several hundred anti-Nazi movies from 1942 to 1945, but hardly ever mentioned the persecution of the Jews, and never once mentioned the genocide. This was because *The House of Rothschild* had led the studio heads to eliminate Jewish characters from the screen in 1933, and they had not yet recovered from the controversy. The studios decided that despite everything that was going on in Germany, the best policy on the Jewish issue was silence. Given that they were perpetuating a stance that originated with their own agreement with the Nazis in the previous decade, the whole notion of Hollywood as a bastion of anti-fascism in the war years needs to be reconsidered.