

HOLLYWOOD AND HITLER

Rick Hinshaw

Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013)

It's quite easy – and quite morally offensive – for those safely removed in time and place from the horrors of Hitler's genocide to point fingers of blame at others – the German people, the Holy See (despite compelling evidence to the contrary), even victims of the Holocaust – for not doing enough to stop it.

But what if there were powerful people who – themselves safely removed from Hitler's terror – not only failed to use their power to oppose him, but actively collaborated with the Nazis, and for the basest of motives: financial gain.

Such is the thoroughly documented case that Ben Urwand, a junior fellow in the Society of Fellows at Harvard University, lays out against all of the major Hollywood studios.

The roots of this collaboration lay in Hitler's recognition of the propaganda value of film.

Sometimes, propaganda value was found in American films produced for entertainment. For example, the Nazis found “strong National Socialist tendencies” in films like “The Lives of a Bengal Lancer” (1935) and “Mr. Deeds goes to Town” (1936); positive portrayals of fascism's “leader principle” in such movies as “Our Daily Bread” (1934) and “Mutiny on the Bounty” (1935); and effective satirizing of democracy in “Mr. Smith goes to Washington” (1939).

While American companies were marketing such movies in Germany to make money, not provide Nazi propaganda, they seemed little

concerned when that happened; for as Urwand notes, “ever since MGM’s “Gabriel over the White House” (1933) the Hollywood studios had released one pro-fascist film after another – films that expressed dissatisfaction with the slowness and inefficiency of the democratic form of government.”

More flagrant was the controlling influence Hollywood – anxious to preserve its lucrative German market – allowed Nazi Germany to exert in drastically altering numerous American movie scripts, and completely quashing the production of others.

The stage had been set in 1930, several years before Hitler came to power, when the Nazis fomented national opposition to the portrayal of Germany in Universal Pictures’ “All Quiet on the Western Front.” When the German government banned the film – negating what one Universal representative said would have been “a huge financial success” – Universal president Carl Laemmle presented a new, heavily edited version. When told it could be approved for screening in Germany only if he instructed all Universal branches throughout the world to make the same cuts to the film, he agreed.

“The Nazis’ actions against “All Quiet on the Western Front,” Urwand writes, “set off a chain of events that lasted over a decade. Not only Universal Pictures but all the Hollywood studios started making deep concessions to the German government, and when Hitler came to power in January 1933, the studios dealt with his representatives directly.” That meant dealing with Georg Gyssling, a German diplomat and Nazi party member who was dispatched to Los Angeles as a “permanent representative ...to work directly with the studios on all movies relating to Germany.”

Gyssling was a hard-liner, and he had at his disposal “Article Fifteen” of Germany’s 1932 movie quota law, stating, as Urwand explains, that “if a company distributed an anti-German picture anywhere in the world, that company would no longer be

granted import permits for the German market.”

Gyssling immediately targeted Warner Brothers’ “Captured,” a film set in a German prison camp during World War I. There was “hardly anything” in the film “to which Gyssling did not object.” Although Warner Brothers made some of Gyssling’s demanded cuts, the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin denounced “Captured” as a hate film and invoked Article Fifteen, closing the German market to Warner Brothers.

The message was received. “For the remainder of the decade,” Urwand writes, “the studios still doing business in Germany were very careful to remain on good terms with Georg Gyssling. Every time they embarked on a potentially threatening production, they received one of his letters reminding them of the terms of Article Fifteen.” In response, “they did not make the same mistake as Warner Brothers. They simply invited Gyssling to the studio lot to preview the film in question, and they made all the cuts that he requested. In an effort to keep the market open for their films ... they were collaborating with Nazi Germany.” The collaboration was especially evident in efforts to emasculate – or kill – the few film scripts in 1930s Hollywood that portrayed the evils of Nazi Germany. And it was aided by the obsequiousness of the Hays Office, the organization headed by Will Hays “that represented the major Hollywood studios.”

In 1933, when RKO – which did not do business in Germany – tried to make “The Mad Dog of Europe,” about Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, the producers, Urwand reports, were told by Hays “that their activities were endangering the business of the major Hollywood studios” in Germany. When Hollywood agent Al Rosen obtained the rights to the film, he said he had it “on good authority” that Gyssling had approached the Hays organization “to use its influence with the producers in Hollywood to make me stop the production.” Rosen vowed to go forward but he was unable to raise financial support from Hollywood’s powerful executives, with Louis B.

Mayer, head of MGM, telling him, "I represent the picture industry here in Hollywood ... we have terrific incomes in Germany and, as far as I am concerned, this picture will never be made." It wasn't.

"The first crucial moment in the studios' dealings with the Nazis," writes Urwand, "was one of pure collaboration: the studios collectively boycotted the anti-Nazi film "The Mad Dog of Europe" to preserve their business interests in Germany."

When, in 1936, "MGM planned to assemble some of its greatest talent" to bring to the screen Sinclair Lewis' novel, *It Can't Happen Here* – "the most important anti-fascist work to appear in the United States in the 1930s," Urwand calls it – the Hays Office issued dire warnings that the film "would have damaging impact on Hollywood's foreign markets."

"Mr. Hays says that a film cannot be made showing the horrors of fascism and extolling the advantages of liberal democracy," Lewis said after MGM cancelled production, "because Hitler and Mussolini might ban other Hollywood films from their countries if we were so rash. I wrote, "'It Can't Happen Here,'" Lewis added, "but I begin to think it certainly can."

The studios were also complicit in Nazi efforts to purge Jews from the film industry. In March 1933, the American film companies in Germany, pressured by the Nazi-affiliated Salesmen's Syndicate, pulled their Jewish workers off the job – first temporarily, then permanently. Ultimately a compromise was worked out, whereby the companies were granted exemptions for their "most desirable Jewish salesmen." "The rest," Urwand reports, "had to go."

"U.S. film units yield to Nazis on Race Issue," was the headline in "Variety," which 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."

In 1936, Urwand recounts, Germany's chief censor, Dr. Ernst Seeger, announced that "the American companies could not bring in pictures employing Jews in any capacity." This coincided with what one commentator described as "the almost complete disappearance of the Jew from American fiction, stage, radio and movies." While this was due at least in part, Urwand explains, to a desire to damp down anti-Semitic reaction in America, for the Hollywood studios it dovetailed nicely with their efforts to please their Nazi business partners.

Their desire to purge Jews from the film industry did not, Urwand points out, preclude the Nazis from doing business with major Hollywood studios, many of them headed by Jews; nor, Urwand laments, did it stop these Jewish film executives from doing business with the Nazis.

"The excuse of ignorance can immediately be ruled out," he states. "The Hollywood executives knew exactly what was going on in Germany, not only because they had been forced to fire their own Jewish salesmen but also because the persecution of the Jews was common knowledge at the time." At this very time, "the largest Jewish organization in the United States, the American Jewish Congress," was sounding the alarm and calling for a boycott on German goods.

The Nazis also benefited from the studios' efforts to get around a 1933 law that prohibited foreign companies from taking their money out of Germany. Paramount and Twentieth Century-Fox produced newsreels of Nazi events inside Germany, which they could sell around the world. The newsreels, predictably, brought the world staged, positive Nazi propaganda. MGM, which did not do newsreels, devised another scheme. In 1938, they began loaning money to certain German firms, receiving in exchange bonds they could sell abroad. However, the firms they were loaning money to, the American trade commissioner pointed out, "are connected to the armament industry especially in the Sudeten territory or Austria. "

“In other words,” Urwand writes, “the largest American motion picture company helped to finance the German war machine.”

Ben Urwand has presented a damning account of what he correctly terms “a dark chapter in Hollywood history” and “a dark chapter in American history.”

Some might be inclined, more than 70 years later, to echo Hillary Clinton’s take on Benghazi: “What difference does it make at this point?”

It makes a difference, first of all, because all history makes a difference, if told truthfully and learned from. It makes a difference because it dramatizes the terrible evil that results when material gain is pursued at all cost, in utter disregard for human life, human rights and human freedom. It makes a difference because – as the September *Catalyst* noted – Hollywood today is engaged in exactly the same kind of collaboration with another oppressive, inhuman regime, Communist China.

It makes a difference because it never should have happened—and we need to know that it did. It makes a difference because it should never happen again—and we need to know that it is.

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