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## Keeper of the Flame: Antifascist Feature Films and the Hollywood Popular Front, 1934-1941

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**KEEPER OF THE FLAME:  
ANTIFASCIST FEATURE FILMS  
AND THE HOLLYWOOD POPULAR FRONT, 1934-1941**

By

Jacob Sager

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

Dr. Kevin A. Leonard, Chair

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Dr. Susan Costanzo

## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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**KEEPER OF THE FLAME: ANTIFASCIST FEATURE FILMS AND THE  
HOLLYWOOD POPULAR FRONT, 1934-1941**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By Jacob Sager  
May, 2015

## **Abstract**

My thesis examines the production and exhibition of left-influenced antifascist feature films in Hollywood from 1934 to 1941. Antifascist, and specifically anti-Nazi films drew upon the ideas and filmmaking talent of a growing antifascist filmmaking community brought together in organizations, associations, and campaigns centered in and inspired by the Hollywood Popular Front. My thesis is meant as a synthesis that ties together the newest scholarship on pre-World War II Hollywood message films, the relationship between the Hollywood studios and the European dictatorships, and the growth of an antifascist community in Los Angeles. It is meant to contribute to the scholarship on late 1930s and early 1940s Hollywood message films. The films analyzed in my thesis are tied together by the contributions of left-wing filmmakers and their success in engaging with audiences through the successful engagement with and utilization of realist aesthetics within the boundaries of the Hollywood studio system to bring antifascist messages to the widest possible audience. The thesis concludes with the legacy of this form of left-wing cinematic engagement on the World War II and immediate postwar message films.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to the History Department of Western Washington University for its support during this long period of study and writing, and specifically to the members of my thesis committee. The recommendations and criticism of Professor Kevin Leonard, Professor Susan Costanzo, and Professor Amanda Eurich greatly contributed to making my thesis a better work of scholarship. I would like to specifically thank Professor Leonard for his advice and guidance from when my thesis was in its earliest stages, and for helping me narrow down its scope and content.

All remaining errors are my own.

I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my family. Their love and support have made me a better student throughout course my continuing education.

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I

*KEEPER OF THE FLAME*

“Of course they didn’t call it fascism. They painted it red, white, and blue and called it Americanism.”<sup>1</sup>

-Christine Forrest (Katherine Hepburn), referring to her late husband and his confederates in *Keeper of the Flame* (1942).

The 1942 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) feature film *Keeper of the Flame* opens on a dark and stormy night when an automobile racing on a forest road careens off of the end of a washed-out bridge. The subsequent montage of newspaper headlines and shocked reactions from ordinary Americans reveals that the victim of the crash is one Robert Forrest. Forrest, a hero of the First World War, the leader of the national Forward America Association, and a celebrity of Lindbergh proportions attracts thousands of citizens to his funeral along with the national press corps. Among the journalists present is Steven O’Malley (Spencer Tracy), a foreign correspondent recently forced out of Germany. Witnessing the outpouring of grief that greets Forrest’s funeral procession, and conscious that the American people are in need of inspiration in these times of war and social strife, O’Malley decides that he will write a hagiography that will celebrate Forrest’s life. Trying to console the young son of the Forrest estate’s groundskeeper, who blames himself for the great man’s untimely demise during the storm, O’Malley

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 191.

compares Robert Forrest to Washington and Lincoln, implying to the boy and by extension to the audience that this great man will long be remembered as a positive symbol of national unity.

However, as O'Malley attempts to penetrate the veil of secrecy that has descended over the estate, he begins to discover that something is amiss. His initial attempt to establish contact with Robert Forrest's widow Christine (Katherine Hepburn) is politely rebuffed by Clive Kerndon (Richard Worf), Forrest's trusted secretary. O'Malley eventually establishes a relationship with Christine, after she is all but ordered to reciprocate his requests by Kerndon after he realizes the propaganda value inherent in the journalist's proposed biography. During their time together, O'Malley deduces that Christine knows far more than she lets on about the circumstances of her husband's accidental demise, and concludes that she had a hand in his death. It is not until the film's final act that Christine Forrest, cornered by O'Malley in a stone cottage on the grounds of the estate disposing of her husband's secret files, admits the truth to the journalist. Robert Forrest was planning to launch a coup against the US government with the assistance of a shadowy network of wealthy confederates. In its place, Forrest planned to establish a fascist dictatorship. The picture that Christine paints of her husband for O'Malley is as far removed from his beloved public persona as night from day. She indicts her husband in the strongest possible terms. "I saw the face of fascism in my own house. Hatred, arrogance, cruelty. I saw what German women were facing. I saw the enemy..."<sup>2</sup> The documents in the cottage provide the damning evidence in support of Christine's condemnation. As part of his plan to seize total power Forrest was planning,

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Roffman and Purdy, 191.

using his allies in the media and his own paramilitary groups, to incite hatred and violence against Jews, African-Americans, organized labor, and the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Although Christine portrays this as a cynical gesture, of turning the American public against itself in a divide-and-rule strategy, the dialogue is revelatory for what a domestic fascist movement is imagined to look like in early wartime Hollywood. On the night of his demise, Robert Forrest was on his way to launch his assault against the government. Christine, riding earlier in the day on the grounds of the estate, had noticed the bridge washed out, but elected to remain silent knowing that her husband would drive along this route.

Unfortunately for both O'Malley and Christine, Kerndon has been eavesdropping on their conversation. He sets the cottage on fire, shoots Christine, and flees with the intention of finishing the plot that his master attempted to set in motion. After Kerndon is killed, O'Malley resolves to write the true story of Christine Forrest, the martyr for democracy who rescued the American people from the enemy that they never knew they had. A final montage, echoing the beginning of the film, shows that the public has taken notice of O'Malley's exposé, presumably with their consciousness raised regarding the danger posed to them by fascism, however it may be manifested at home or abroad. Now that this heroic journalist has informed them of the truth, the American people can be trusted to act appropriately on these outrageous revelations. Along with their true hero, it is the people who are the collective keepers of the flame for democracy and liberty.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Roffman and Purdy, 191.

<sup>4</sup> *Keeper of the Flame*. DVD. Directed by George Cukor, 1942. Warner Home Video, 2011.

## II

### *KEEPER OF THE FLAME* AND ITS WORLD

Directed by George Cukor and filmed from a screenplay written by Donald Ogden Stewart (adopted from the novel of the same name by I.A.R. Wylie), *Keeper of the Flame*, released by MGM a year after America's entrance into World War II, was a feature film that attempted to articulate an opposition to the European fascist dictatorships based around a common set of democratic national values which must be relearned by the protagonist over the course of the story. Steven O'Malley's journey is similar to the enlightenment experienced by the protagonists of earlier pro-interventionist films, whose naïve unawareness transforms into a grim knowledge of the dangers posed to the American people by fascism in all of its guises. O'Malley's ideological transformation is the realization that the real problems and challenges that the nation faces cannot and should not be solved by uncritical faith in one man, no matter how beloved he may be by the public at large. In this respect, from the perspective of the Federal government's Office of War Information (OWI), *Keeper of the Flame* was a step in the right direction away from earlier anti-Axis message films that broadcasted crude, jingoistic images of enemy nationals yet said nothing about America's war aims, articulated a celebration of American values, or looked forward to a better postwar world in which democracy would be triumphant.<sup>5</sup> *Keeper of the Flame* also represented a high point for left-influenced antifascist messages in mainstream American cinema, linking

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<sup>5</sup> Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 66-81.

the emergence of the potential dictator Robert Forest and his hatred of the people with a palpable rot in America's political and corporate culture—at one point an increasingly suspicious O'Malley remarks to Kerndon that he would do well for himself in advertising, as Kerndon waxes poetically about his late master's love of his country and natural skills at leadership.<sup>6</sup> In presenting Forrest as the leader of a business cabal that plots to seize total power through inciting racial hatred and crushing organized labor, the film echoes the great national controversies and disputes of the 1930s that the American government desired to keep quiet for the duration of the Second World War. *Keeper of the Flame* uses Christine's moral quandary as the heart of its dramatic tension: to save her husband's life and see the nation fall, or let her husband die to save the nation and its people? Although lead actress Katherine Hepburn pushed for a more conventional romantic plot, and George Cukor was uninterested in the film's ideological underpinnings, enough of the film's political dimensions survived to cause consternation for studio head Louis B. Mayer at the initial screening.<sup>7</sup> Donald Ogden Stewart, writing later of the production in his autobiography, placed the film in its time and place, observing,

Certainly such a picture could never have been produced later, after the Congressional committees had begun to instruct Hollywood in the "true" brand of Americanism, and the producers had abjectly gone down on their knees to the McCarthy definition of patriotism. But in those days Roosevelt was still the hero, the Anti-Nazi League and the League of American Writers had helped educate the movie colony in the need for an artist to be a politically aware person, and it is to the glory of Hollywood's war effort that such a fine "politically conscious" picture was allowed to be released.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Keeper of the Flame*.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick McGillan, *George Cukor: A Double Life, A Biography of the Gentleman Director* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991), 167-169; Stewart, 262.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Ogden Stewart, *By A Stroke of Luck! An Autobiography* (New York: Paddington Press, 1975), 262.

Stewart links this World War II message film with a form of political engagement and political activism that had enjoyed its heyday in Hollywood during the mid-to-late 1930s, an activist culture that linked the triumphs of fascism in Europe with both the dark side of American capitalism and with the nation's endemic domestic prejudices. In 1942, Donald Ogden Stewart was one of Hollywood's most talented and powerful screenwriters.

Stewart was also one of the most influential left-wing radicals in the film capital, having cut his teeth as the benefactor and leader of a number of organizations during the heyday of the Popular Front, most notably as the public face and as one of the leaders of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League.

*Keeper of the Flame* represented something of a return to form for Stewart and others like him to the heyday of their 1930s political activism. For a brief window of time, some of the antifascist messages that had been once articulated by the political left in Hollywood coincided with the prerogatives of the Federal government and the upper ranks of studio management in the cultural sphere. The film's open denunciation of fascism's threat to the American people offered a reaffirmation for Stewart after the period of gross ideological and personal uncertainty created in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression pact signed in August, 1939. This agreement between the two ostensibly enemy ideologies had sparked the collapse of the organized Popular Front in Hollywood and facilitating a bitter split between the Communist and non-Communist left. The collapse of the organized 1930s Popular Front had left many former activists disillusioned or now put in the position of trying to prevent an armed confrontation with the fascist dictatorships in the name of preserving the national security of the Soviet Union and world peace.

### III

My thesis will examine the ways in which Hollywood feature films constructed antifascist images and messages by drawing upon the ideas and political culture articulated by the Hollywood Popular Front, from 1934 until America's entry into the Second World War in 1941. These left-influenced antifascist feature films represented a confluence between an activist left, the growth of an antifascist filmmaking community in Los Angeles, and new cinematic techniques that brought progressive messages to the widest possible audience, primarily through a successful engagement with the studio system. The Hollywood Popular Front associational and artistic movements were important voices in the attempt to forge a cinema that was more politically conscious and rooted in realism than the ideals of "pure entertainment" espoused by most of the industry's management and trade institutions suggested.

In the context of the international ideological and cultural trends of the mid-to-late 1930s, the term "Popular Front", in its narrowest definition, refers to the call by the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, held from July 25 to August 20, 1935, for an alliance between the various national Communist parties and any other left-wing political faction that was willing to stand against fascism.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the political and cultural atmosphere of the United States in the 1930s, Popular Front activism, intellectual ferment, and cultural productions were based around an assumed set of shared values rooted in a commitment to supporting the rise of organized labor, campaigning against domestic forms of racism, and staunchly opposing the spread of

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<sup>9</sup> Cecile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 37.

fascism abroad and at home. Popular Front-influenced art was closely related to the emergence of a realist aesthetic that attempted to convey the problems and controversies experienced by the public at large for mass audiences acutely aware of the chaos and desperation that had been unleashed by the Great Depression. Twentieth century American intellectuals and artists as diverse in their backgrounds as Carey McWilliams, Marc Blitzstein, Richard Wright, Tillie Olson, Josh White, and Orson Welles at one time or another were affiliated or expressed sympathy with the institutions, organizations, and ideas that emerged during this period of left-wing solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

German film historian Jan-Christopher Horak, in his essay on the German émigré cinema produced worldwide from 1933 to 1950, begins his analysis by establishing what exactly constitutes this form of filmmaking. In Horak's definition, German exile cinema can be defined as such if a émigré producer, director, and screenwriter worked upon the same production together.<sup>11</sup> I do not propose a similar precise definition for the left-influenced antifascist message films of the 1930s, due both to the flexibility that many participants in Popular Front organizations had in committing to active political involvement during the decade, and the different political allegiances that individuals involved in these groups maintained during this time. Left-influenced antifascist feature films can best be seen, to borrow from and expand upon the analysis of Chris Vials, as containing political messages for the masses that were refracted through a medium for the

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997 [2010 ed.]); especially interesting in Denning's book is Chapter 10: "The Politics of Magic: Orson Welles's Allegories of Anti-Fascism," 362-402.

<sup>11</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak and Jennifer Bishop, "German Exile Cinema, 1933-1950," in *Film History*, Vol. 8, No. 4, International Trends in Film Studies (1996), 374.

masses.<sup>12</sup> These particular kinds of message films drew upon the talents of a growing antifascist filmmaking community in Hollywood which emerged through the simultaneous arrival of domestic left-wing and anti-Nazi émigré artists and intellectuals, and represent products that stand as the strongest possible antifascist message films as created and constructed within the studio system's overlapping institutions and outlets of production, distribution, and exhibition.

The films analyzed in my thesis are all examples of this form of mass marketed realism, a realism that appealed to audiences by drawing upon comforting and familiar historical symbolism and journalistic techniques. They include William Dieterle's *Juarez* (1939), which was part of a wider cycle of biopics which the émigré director made for Warner Bros. from 1936 until 1941 (consisting of *The Life of Louis Pasteur* [1936], *The Life of Emile Zola* [1937], and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* [1940]), the 1938 Spanish Civil War drama *Blockade*, which Dieterle directed under the auspices of independent producer Walter Wanger, Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), Archie Mayo's *Black Legion* (1937), Anatole Litvak's *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), and Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). Because the Popular Front was an international political and artistic phenomenon during the mid-to-late 1930s, I will also touch upon the reception of two 1938 left-influenced antifascist films in the United States. The French film *La Marseilles*, directed by Jean Renoir and *Professor Mamlock*, directed by Adolf Minkin and Herbert Rapaport were Popular Front antifascist message films created under different national

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), xxix-xxx.

conditions of censorship and under different conditions relating to distribution and exhibition.

#### IV

My thesis has been influenced by both the scholarship on the political content of the cinema of the Golden Age of Hollywood and the recent reassessment by historians of the Popular Front movement's place in 1930s American culture, which in turn has expanded the scholarly discussion on the relationship between Hollywood filmmaking and international politics. For many decades after the end of the Second World War, the Popular Front was dismissed by many American historians as a strange, temporary agglomeration rooted in the disastrous infiltration of the Communist Party into well-meaning but naïve liberal and progressive movements. This line of thinking and analysis was heavily influenced by the narratives and explanations offered by many former activists who recanted their past involvement in the Popular Front's political and cultural associations in the shadow of the Cold War's anti-Communist hysteria, and was further reinforced by the construction of a postwar "consensus" American history that ignored the variegated experiences of the men and women who had participated in its political causes and contributed to its cultural productions.<sup>13</sup> In this postwar narrative, realism was configured as being opposed to and separate from popular culture, rather than a set of artistic techniques that engaged with and drew upon the masses for inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

Over the last several decades there has been a critical reassessment by historians regarding how politically active and politically conscious Hollywood was during its

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<sup>13</sup> Denning, 464-466.

<sup>14</sup> Vials, xvii.

Golden Age, specifically from the late 1920s until the late 1940s. The scholarship on 1930s and 1940s cinematic political consciousness has been heavily influenced by and received impetus from the need to account for the postwar purge of known and suspected Communists from the Hollywood studios by way of industry blacklist and government hearings. One of the most important of these accounts was provided by Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund's *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, published in 1976. Intended as a study that would place Hollywood's post-World War II anti-Communist purge in the context of the preceding history of political mobilization and acrimonious labor disputes in the film capital, their book addressed important questions regarding the place of political activism in shaping movie production in the 1930s and 1940s. *The Inquisition in Hollywood* argued that the 1930s Popular Front represented the last time, as of the book's initial publication, when a truly unified political left emerged both in Hollywood and in the United States. Conversely, the book also offered a critical assessment of the roles that factionalism, tactical blunders, moral inflexibility, and outside pressure from hostile politicians and management had had in ensuring that the political left did not upend the status quo within the studio system. Additionally, their book highlighted the importance of screenwriters in the wave of 1930s and 1940s left-wing political activism, arguing that the late-1920s revolution in sound technology, which forced the studios to hire experienced writers to pen scenarios and screenplays, was an important facet both in building a new political culture in Hollywood and shifting the boundaries as to how openly political a feature film could be in certain circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976 [2003 ed.]). The argument highlighting the importance of screenwriters in the projects to raise

Along with these new assessments about the political conflicts and consciousness in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood, there has also been a new wave of scholarship as to how the Popular Front manifested itself in an American political and cultural context during the 1930s. Michael Denning's 1998 book *The Cultural Front* is a seminal and admittedly sympathetic examination of the impact that the Popular Front had on US culture as a whole. Denning's book argued that far from being misled or driven by the sectarian prerogatives of the Communist Party, the individuals and associations of the Popular Front were part of a process of the non-Communist left asserting itself in a wide variety of cultural productions, publications, and campaigns of mobilization across a broad array of genres and mediums. In this retelling, the Popular Front was best analyzed as the story of how the "periphery" of the American left was actually the consensus of a wider movement for economic change, social justice, and political equality during the Great Depression, the Second World War, and into the early postwar years.<sup>16</sup> Denning's work has been expanded upon in the field of film studies in Saverio Giovacchini's 2001 book *Democratic Modernism*, which analyzes the impact that the cultural front had on the interwar, wartime, and immediate postwar cinema of the United States. Giovacchini's work discusses the quest by American filmmakers for a more realist, topical cinema, and the impact that newcomers to the film capital had on message films. Giovacchini's narrative contrasts the prewar and wartime attempts to construct an American realist and politically-aware filmmaking culture with how these attempts ultimately foundered under

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consciousness in Hollywood has been expanded upon in Paul Buhle and David Wagner's *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favorite Movies* (New York: New Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997 [2010 ed.]).

the combined pressures of the Red Scare, the massive postwar labor conflicts in Hollywood, and the end of the classical studio system. Additionally, Giovacchini emphasizes the importance that the growth of an antifascist community in Los Angeles during the 1930s had on the production of antifascist message films. This community consisted of two broad groups: left-leaning writers from the Eastern Seaboard (“the Hollywood New Yorkers”) and European émigrés fleeing Nazi persecution (the “Hollywood Europeans”).<sup>17</sup>

The scholarly reassessment of the impact of the Popular Front on American culture and society have in recent years have coincided with the publication of a new generation of history books regarding the relationship and conflicts between Hollywood and the prewar European fascist dictatorships. These new studies are valuable companions to the older literature on the American cinema of the Second World War, which tends to gloss over the prewar antifascist releases in comparison to the anti-Axis message films released during the conflict itself. In particular, Thomas Doherty’s *Hollywood and Hitler* attempts to reconstruct exactly what American audiences would have watched on the topic of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis onscreen from 1933 until 1939, and how this shaped public opinion regarding both the fascist dictatorships and the subsequent national debate over intervening on the side of the Allies from 1939 until 1941. Doherty’s book emphasizes the important role played by the studio system in creating a new culture of national and international broadcast news during the 1930s, and how this particular kind of journalism defined the images and themes that the American

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<sup>17</sup> Saverio Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 16-19, 27-35.

people came to associate with Nazism. Doherty's book expands on the themes of David Welky's *The Moguls and the Dictators*, published in 2008. Welky's book is a synthesis that explores the development of the relationship between the Hollywood studios and the Federal government during the 1930s, and the roles that the studios undertook to extol the foreign and national defense policies of the Roosevelt administration. Both Doherty and Welky note how open ideological message films denouncing the fascist dictatorships encountered strong resistance from the industry's censorship organs, which were skeptical of any release that might negatively impact the studios' bottom line domestically or internationally.<sup>18</sup> Doherty and Welky, as well as Ben Urwand in his far more critical work on Hollywood's relationship with the Third Reich, emphasize how the decisions made by the major American studios, as well as the policies of the MPPDA and its Production Code Administration, were affected by the interconnected nature of the global film industry. There has also been a new wave of scholarship that has emphasized the international aspect of filmmaking during the first half of the twentieth century, when film was considered an important form of cultural diplomacy and national advertising.

## V

### Influences and Intentions

There have been, during the course of my college education, several different

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); David Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). A far more controversial addition to this area of study is Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

fields of interest that have influenced my choice of a thesis topic. As an undergraduate, I developed an interest in cinema through several excellent “Film as History” courses, which first inspired me to think of a feature film as a text that could be used to explore the wider implications for the society and culture in which it was produced. I also developed an interest in how the political conflicts and different systems of political oppression affected popular culture around the world during the interwar period, from 1918 until 1939, especially between the two mass movements that stood opposed to liberal democracy, fascism and communism. From these broad areas of interest, I became interested in exploring in greater detail how antifascist narratives were constructed in world cinema during the 1930s and early 1940s, especially in Hollywood during its “Golden Age.” The controversial relationship between political cinema, the wider activist left-wing culture, and foreign relations has arguably been given new impetus by the fact that contemporary Hollywood is not immune from the same forms of commercial pressure and hostility exerted by repressive foreign regimes.<sup>19</sup>

My thesis is intended to contribute to a better understanding of Hollywood filmmaking during the transition from 1930s to 1940s styles of movie production. To expand upon what Chris Robé has called for in regards to left film criticism and film theory from this period of time,<sup>20</sup> this means providing a scholarly synthesis of the expansion of the period’s film styles (montage, deep focus cinematography, Expressionist, and semi-documentary) to better understand the left’s conceptualization

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<sup>19</sup> In December 2014, an organization of hackers, later believed to have been hired by the North Korean government, successfully intimidated the major US cinema chains into cancelling the release of *The Interview*, a satire of the former country’s Juche dictatorship.

<sup>20</sup> Robé, 232.

and condemnation of fascism.

I do not want to overstate the extent to which left-influenced antifascist messages and imagery were present in 1930s American cinema, even among the wider circle of films from this decade that can be construed as having an overt political intent. Even during the Second World War, when the promotion of a consistent set of patriotic, antifascist, and internationalist themes was encouraged by the Federal government in Hollywood, only a third of all feature films made during the conflict openly commented on issues relating to the war effort.<sup>21</sup> Nor do I wish to overstate the involvement of Hollywood's filmmakers with Popular Front antifascist campaigns and institutions. The demise of the Popular Front movement in wake of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact underscored the fragility of this coalition and the limits of its overall appeal. Support for the Popular Front took many forms and during its heyday in Hollywood and nationally. The involvement in a left-wing movement on the part of artists could be as discreet as a donation, signing a petition, or attending a single mega-event hosted by a group such as HANL.

I see my thesis as contributing to a better understanding of antifascism in 1930s and 1940s American culture, and specifically antifascism in Hollywood feature films. One of the goals of my thesis is to provide a synthesis between the new historical literature on the 1930s left antifascist Hollywood community, and the recent reassessment on the significance of the period's political films and their producers on the wider culture of 1930s Los Angeles and the United States. Saverio Giovacchini observes that the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry, *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006 [2010 ed.]), 22.

importance that some historians of cinema have placed on films and filmmakers is part of a wider trend of reassessing the nature and presence of realism in 1930s and 1940s mass media and mass culture, a realism that Giovacchini refers to as “a more democratic form of modernism.”<sup>22</sup> In this new frame of analysis, the effectiveness of realist filmmaking techniques and left-aligned filmmakers was predicated by their willingness and ability to engage the popular culture of their imagined mass audiences, rather than standing in opposition to popular culture. The Great Depression and the Second World War coincided with the height of the influence and popularity of motion pictures, and was also a time when studio management, activist groups, local governments, and industry institutions attempted to closely control what messages were shown onscreen. Another goal of my thesis is to explore how left-influenced antifascist messages were found to be compatible with the efforts of the major studios to ensure the retention of the widest possible audience, which prefigured the impact that the antifascist left on many of the message films produced during the Second World War.

It is not my intention to chronicle all manifestations of American antifascist cultural productions (novellas, such as Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million*, plays such as Robert Sherwood’s *Idiot’s Delight*, or novels such as Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here*) that were created from 1934 until 1941. I will also not be analyzing either the anti-Nazi newsreels or documentaries from the period. This is not to diminish the wide-ranging impact that both forms of filmmaking (especially newsreels) played in shaping the public opinion of the American people on the controversies over how to respond to the threat of the fascist dictatorships, or the importance that Popular Front organizations

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<sup>22</sup> Giovacchini, 9.

placed on documentary filmmaking as a tool to mobilize public opinion and generosity on issues relating to the deteriorating international situation in the second half of the 1930s. I am more interested in how these attempts to document current events and inform the public about the crises in Europe spawned by the territorial aggrandizement of the fascist dictatorships were refracted specifically through Hollywood feature films. I will also refrain from an extensive discussion of the impact of the postwar anti-Communist purge had on the filmmakers associated with the Popular Front, except to place the events of the late 1940s in a wider political and aesthetic context in a Hollywood transformed both by wartime filmmaking conditions and consumer tastes.

The Popular Front antifascist imagery, and Popular Front imagery and symbolism in feature films in general, is different in scope and content from that present in other mediums. It is not my intention to present an image of a single “school” of political filmmaking in Hollywood during the 1930s and early 1940s, or the idea that the production of message films were driven by small numbers of politically conscious auteurs. Unlike the relatively more clear-cut works that have been associated by cultural historians as belonging to this particular movement, place, and time such as proletarian novels, the “ghetto pastorals” of Mike Gold and Richard Wright, or the musical theater of Marc Blitzstein and Harold Rome, Hollywood was governed by a set of trade, studio, and political censorship rules that were not applied as systematically or consistently as those limitations regarding other mediums. This industry censorship regime made open political discussions derived from any side of the American political spectrum extraordinarily difficult to bring to the big screen.

## Feature films as historical documents

In light of the historiographical and theoretical context mentioned above, there are several questions that will form a basis for my analysis of the feature films under consideration in my thesis. These are questions meant to ground the left-influenced antifascist feature films of the 1930s and early 1940s within a wider culture of political engagement and consciousness:

- Where did left-influenced message films place the people in the struggle against fascism?
- How did left-influenced antifascist feature films attempt to present their scenarios as truthful representations of reality?
- How did left-influenced antifascist feature films draw upon historical events to construct their political narratives?
- What were the most significant limitations and constraints to articulating an antifascist narrative rooted in Popular Front assumptions through cinema?  
Conversely, in what ways were antifascist feature films able to assimilate to the aesthetic and economic boundaries of the classical Hollywood studio system?

I am particularly interested in the ways in which left-influenced antifascist imagery and messages were refracted through the elaborate process of studio production, exhibition, distribution, and industry censorship, and how a leftist discourse on the threat of the European dictatorships was found to be compatible with the necessities of studio management and the Federal government. One aspect of left-influenced antifascist message films that is worth considering is the idea of utilizing the method of “trading

places,” which means, in the words of Judith Smith in her discussion of postwar projects about anti-Semitism, “conflating widely varying experiences of discrimination.”<sup>23</sup> While not unique to left-wing thought during this period of time, it was a tactic that was used by an array of filmmakers to highlight the relationship between fascism and racial oppression. Rather than completely erasing discussions of Nazi anti-Semitism, a particular kind of prejudice and racial hatred was compared to and substituted with other forms of racism and discrimination.

The second aspect of antifascism in the message films of the 1930s that I will be analyzing closely is the oppositional relationship that was constructed by filmmakers between ordinary people and adherents of fascist worldviews. In keeping with a wider cultural and political environment which commented upon and condemned the plight that the American people faced in the Great Depression, feature films released by the Hollywood studios during the 1930s generally drew upon the idea of “the people”, and more broadly collective action to address the nation’s problems as a positive contrast to the individuals and organizations associated with the fascist dictatorships. Over the course of the decade, ordinary Americans were presented onscreen as instinctually skeptical and opposed to the machinations of those who would threaten their social peace and political liberties. Two social problem films from this era, Fritz Lang’s *Fury* (1936) and Archie Mayo’s *Black Legion* (1937) presented a more critical view of how ordinary Americans could fall victim to the siren call of fascistic demagogues or mindless hatred.

Finally, I will also give particular focus to the ways in which left-influenced

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<sup>23</sup> Judith E. Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 151.

message films constructed a moral argument against fascism. These films produced narratives that linked the depravities inherent in fascistic individuals and regimes with broader problems inherent in the collapse of the American economy and the fracturing of American society in the Great Depression. Antifascism in Hollywood message films served as a significant aesthetic and ideological way of linking the crimes committed by the European dictatorships and their American sympathizers with an assault on an Americanism that was rooted in a common embrace of democratic values, the rights of ordinary people to defend their homes and land from aggressors, and recognized the need for existing domestic and international systems to be reformed for a common benefit. While adhering to the demands and constraints placed upon the production of feature films by the Production Code Administration and other forms of internal censorship, these particular films enhanced a moralist denunciation of fascism by placing its true believers safely outside of the American mainstream.

An examination of Popular Front antifascism in the message films of the 1930s and early 1940s also necessitates a critical examination of the ideological limitations in the narratives of these particular kinds of films. Among the most glaring failures that appears immediately from a modern viewing of these left-influenced films is their unwillingness to openly acknowledge anti-Semitism as an integral pillar of Nazi ideology. This omission, along with a reluctance to openly address the true state domestic race relations more broadly, were usually byproducts of the influence played by the film industry's overlapping studio politics and policies of censorship which discouraged any subject that might cause offense or increase the visibility of controversial subjects. They were reflective of a left-wing ideology that could not view the Nazi persecution of the

Jews as anything other than one symptom in a broader, universal problem. Exceptions to this rule of omission are the Soviet import *Professor Mamlock* and Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, both of which for different reasons were not bound by the conventional Hollywood studio and industry taboos against openly broaching the subject of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Many of the films analyzed in my thesis were produced by Warner Bros., and although at least one major study has been done of the studio's early and consistent anti-Nazi business practices and message films,<sup>24</sup> I am particularly interested in the ways in which the antifascist messages and aesthetics of the Popular Front years were found to be compatible to that studio's "house style" of the 1930s. In the same way that the Second World War drove radical screenwriters into articulating political positions that were more amenable to the studio system and the Federal Government, films that drew upon Popular Front imagery and symbolism to criticize and denounce fascism and Nazism found themselves compatible with a Warners' house style that stressed a quick-paced, ripped-from-the-headlines narrative in many of their productions. The work produced by filmmakers sympathetic to the Popular Front for Warner Bros. releases as diverse as William Dieterle's biopic cycle and Anatole Litvak's *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* anticipated many of the themes and production techniques that would become staples of the most memorable Hollywood World War II releases. With the exception of *La Marseilles* and *Professor Mamlock*, the films in the main body of my thesis are all examples of Hollywood A films—those productions released by the studios with the

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<sup>24</sup> Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.'s Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

intention of capturing the widest possible audience both domestically and overseas.<sup>25</sup>

### Thesis Structure

The thesis will be divided into two chapters and a conclusion. The period of time bookended in this essay includes the emergence of the Hollywood Popular Front during the mid to late 1930s, its fragmentation from August 1939 until June 1941, and the beginnings of the second wartime popular front from June to December 1941. Due to the potentially broad nature of this topic, I have formatted my thesis by theme, rather than by a strict adherence to chronology. The first chapter, “Antifascist Histories”, examines the production of feature films that drew upon historical events or subjects to comment on the deteriorating international security situation faced by the democracies in the face of the fascist dictatorships during the 1930s. I will use the example of William Dieterle’s series of biopics, produced for Warner Bros. from 1936 to 1941, to examine how the Popular Front’s antifascist ideas were reflected in message films that were intended to celebrate courageous individuals and oppose prejudice in the name of justice and enlightenment, with a particular focus on *Juarez* (1939). Since the Popular Front was an international political and cultural moment during the mid-to-late 1930s, the first chapter will also touch upon two 1938 foreign films that excited radical and liberal American film critics and observers with the possibilities of a more daring cinema: the Soviet director Adolf Minkin’s *Professor Mamlock* and French director Jean Renoir’s *La Marseilles*. These two films were radical interpretations, respectively, of recent history

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<sup>25</sup> In contrast to A films, B films were intended for release solely in domestic circuits, and were produced under a different set of business and censorial circumstances than higher budgeted films.

and events long past, and attempted to place in different ways the fates of ordinary people into the center of great historical upheavals and the never-ending struggle against reactionary tyranny. They are also useful as examples of how Popular Front antifascist tropes were articulated through different national cinematic traditions, under different levels of national censorship, and under different business considerations.

Chapter One will be introduced by a section entitled “A Panorama of Cinematic Consciousness”, which will place the emergence and duration of the Hollywood Popular Front in the context of the wider world of American and international cultural politics from 1934 to 1941.

The second chapter, “Modern Times,” examines left-influenced antifascist feature films that explored fascism as a contemporary threat, whether undertaken by domestic American groups or the agents of the dictatorships. This chapter will examine the ways in which fascism was portrayed onscreen as a subversive threat to domestic freedoms and social stability, and ultimately promoted the need for policies of a strong national defense and internal security to successfully confront this danger. “Modern Times” will explore in particular how screenwriters and directors associated with the Popular Front explored in their scenarios the attraction that fascism held for ordinary Americans in hard times, an important theme explored by Fritz Lang in MGM’s *Fury* (1936), and Archie Mayo in Warner Bros.’ *Black Legion* (1937). Conversely, this chapter will also examine how filmmakers constructed a cordon sanitaire between the American people (and their shared democratic culture), and the representatives of the European fascist dictatorships. “Modern Times” will conclude with an analysis of Charles Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*, as an example of an anti-Nazi production that was strongly influenced by the wider

antifascist political culture that manifested itself more openly than ever before during its lengthy production.

Chapter Two will be introduced by a section entitled “A Panorama of Cinematic Censorship,” that will detail the relationship between Hollywood message films and the systems of industry and political censorship from 1934 to 1941.

My thesis will be concluded with an epilogue, “Legacies,” exploring the impact that the left-influenced antifascist productions of the 1930s and early 1940s had on the political Hollywood cinema of the wartime and immediate postwar years. The epilogue will summarize the limitations of the antifascist feature films produced between 1934 and 1941 in the context of changing domestic tastes and geopolitical realities, specifically in the context of the changing structures of the global film industry, the erosion of realist aesthetics in Hollywood, and the emergence of the Soviet Union as the new looming danger in American cultural, social, and political consciousness. I will specifically focus on the relationship between the left-influenced antifascist feature films of the 1930s and the emergence of the politically conscious, often antifascist and anti-racist films noir during and immediately after the Second World War.

CHAPTER ONE:  
ANTIFASCIST HISTORIES

# I

## A PANORAMA OF CINEMATIC CONSCIOUSNESS, 1934-1941

The emergence of an antifascist political consciousness in Hollywood during the late 1930s and early 1940s was one element of several broader intellectual and cultural trends. The term “consciousness” is admittedly a contestable one, but it serves as a useful way in which to describe the attempts by certain filmmakers and film industry activists to influence the content of feature films during the consolidation and apogee of the classical Hollywood studio system. One of the most important aspects of the emergence of a left-wing political consciousness in American filmmaking circles was the belief that the struggle for a better world was one that transcended, or at least ought to have transcended, the barriers posed by societal conventions and national borders. For many radical and left wing film critics, events far from Los Angeles provided exciting alternatives to the seemingly endless frivolity produced in Hollywood. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the productions and theories of Soviet directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, and Vsevolod Pudovkin inspired excited discussions and debates about the desirability and plausibility of an American cinema that would excise melodrama and insipid story formulas in favor of forms of filmmaking that would celebrate revolution through montage and the actions of the crowd, while de-emphasizing plots centered around one or two central protagonists.<sup>26</sup> Under these ideological auspices, feature films were viewed as vital tools to educate their audiences with the correct political messages and to inspire revolutionary action on

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<sup>26</sup>Robé, 52-53.

behalf of the Soviet Union. These debates were facilitated by a new cinematic literary culture, found both in a new generation of film journals and in a growing culture of criticism in the radical and mainstream press.<sup>27</sup> For all of their disagreements on the correct manner to proceed in pushing Hollywood film culture in a more progressive direction, most radical observers of the cinema were in agreement that film could play a vital role in commenting upon the problems and injustices of the world around them.

From the perspective of the political left, especially its most radical parties and factions, many of the world's injustices increasingly revolved around the successes in Europe of movements antithetical to their values and worldviews. The apparent success of Benito Mussolini's Fascists in the early 1920s and Adolf Hitler's NSDAP in Germany in the early 1930s in gaining and then violently consolidating total power posed intellectual problems for a political left that had long expected the working class, and ordinary people more broadly, to recognize regardless of national origin that their true interests lay in the rise and triumph of a revolutionary socialism, best represented by the project to construct the ideal Communist state in the Soviet Union. The Nazi acquisition and consolidation of power in 1933 and 1934 spurred the Soviet-controlled Comintern to advance a change in tactics, which would be formally articulated in 1935. Whereas liberals and social democrats around the world had recently been vilified as worse than the actual fascists, now national Communist parties were urged to form alliances with these same movements to blunt the spread of fascism. This was extolled as the best

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<sup>27</sup>Robé, 40-52. Notable radical film journals from this period include *Close Up* (founded in 1927), *Experimental Cinema* (1930-1934), and a larger number of shorter-lived publications. Robé also notes that many left-aligned film critics wrote for a wide array of publications across the journalistic spectrum. (Ibid, 43-51).

method to preserve the international security of the Soviet Union in the face of a German regime hostile to its very existence. A political alliance uniting the left would push the world in the direction of pro-Soviet collective security.<sup>28</sup> The Communist Party itself did not exist in a political or ideological vacuum, especially in the United States. As Michael Denning observes, it was the non-Communist left that was at the center of organized left-wing political action, rather than the CPUSA.<sup>29</sup> During the 1930s, shaped by the crisis of the Great Depression and spurred into action by national trends and events as different as the campaign to organize the auto and steel industries by the UAW and the CIO, the campaign to free the jailed Scottsboro boys in Alabama, and the campaigns launched in support of the Spanish Republic against Francisco Franco's Nationalists, activists affiliated with different Popular Front-aligned movements imagined that all struggles against inequality, injustice, and fascist aggression was part of a larger international struggle against the forces of reaction and barbarism.<sup>30</sup>

Those in Hollywood sympathetic with or active in the political left and other radical movements in the early 1930s found themselves arrayed against an industrial and a political establishment staunchly opposed to their vision of a film industry reformed with better working conditions and producing more openly political films. One of the attractions Los Angeles had held for the pioneering filmmakers at the dawn of the century was that it seemed to be far removed from the labor conflicts budding in the industrialized east, with a government and police force that would act as a break to any

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<sup>28</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 86-87.

<sup>29</sup> Denning, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 98-99.

serious radical activity. In spite of the very real geographical, intellectual, and ideological distances that initially separated Hollywood from the rest the nation, the new center of world cinema was not immune from the winds of political controversy. This was in great part facilitated by the sudden need of producers in the late 1920s to employ a new class of screenwriters. With the technological and commercial breakthrough that came in the form of Warner Bros.' partial talkie *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the major studios were suddenly in need of a regular pool of screenwriters who could create believable dialogue for their feature films. The arrival of new groups of prospective writers from outside of California, especially Chicago and New York City, played an immeasurable role in transforming the wider political culture of Los Angeles during the following decades. This migration occurred against the backdrop of inter-industry upheaval spurred by the mass adoption of sound and the 1929 stock market crash.<sup>31</sup> In an era when the powerful producers at the major studios viewed almost everyone who worked on or contributed to the production of their feature films as little more than hired hands, screenwriters quickly found themselves at the bottom of the industry's developing and interlinked systems of production, distribution, and exhibition.<sup>32</sup>

Many filmmakers who were involved in Popular Front activism in Hollywood had their formative experiences in the New York City theater world. Institutions and organizations such as the Group Theater, the Theater of Action, the Mercury Theater, and the Federal Theater of the Works Progress Administration provided important creative outlets for artists as diverse in background and political sympathies as Orson Welles, Elia

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1975 [1994 ed.]), 237.

<sup>32</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 5-15.

Kazan, Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson, Dore Schary, Clifford Odets, Robert Rossen, and Abraham Polonsky.<sup>33</sup> The structure of the studio system's screenwriting process proved to be an important catalyst for political action in the early 1930s. Screenwriters, having virtually no control over the creative content of their work, often forced into collaborating with other writers whether they wished to or not, and paid irregularly outside of a small pool of exclusive individuals favored by management, attempted to organize themselves into a Screen Writers' Guild (SWG) during the early 1930s, which would not be formally recognized by the major studios until 1939. This conflict between writers and management precipitated an upswing of political organization, public debate, and political agitation in Hollywood.<sup>34</sup> Another important catalyst in the context of local politics was the outcome of the 1934 California gubernatorial election. During this campaign, the major Hollywood studios mobilized their resources against the candidacy of Democratic Party nominee and socialist Upton Sinclair. Incensed by directives that mandated contributions and votes for Sinclair's opponent Frank Merriam at several studios, liberal and radical activists from the ranks of the studio system's directors, actors, and screenwriters founded the Motion Picture Democratic Committee (MPDC), which would successfully campaign for Merriam's ouster in 1938.<sup>35</sup> Local, national, and international events reinforced the need, according to both local and recently transplanted

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<sup>33</sup> Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 5-14. Many Jewish future screenwriters, actors, and directors were additionally influenced in their political ideas by their time in New York's then extensive Yiddish-language theater circuit (Ibid, 7-9).

<sup>34</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 3-5; David Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 137.

<sup>35</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 89-94.

activists, for the film industry to do a better job of exploring contemporary issues and controversies. Hollywood activists and associations mobilized for the rights of Californian migrant workers, for the acquittal of the Scottsboro boys, and for the Federal government to take a harsher stance against the European fascist dictatorships, especially Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Donald Ogden Stewart remembered these associations when describing his own conversion to a more radical worldview even as he found success as one of Hollywood's most prominent screenwriters,

Gradually in my mind began to form the image of a "worker" whom I wanted to have the same sense of freedom and brotherhood that I had had at college... And over in the corner of my imagination, behind the worker, there crouched an image of a little man who needed my help—the oppressed, the unemployed, the hungry, the sharecropper, the Jew under Hitler, the Negro...<sup>36</sup>

The threat posed by the Third Reich was brought home to the film capital by a sudden influx of European (and specifically German-speaking) émigrés who arrived in Los Angeles during the course of the 1930s. The ascension of Adolf Hitler to the office of German chancellor had lasting cultural impacts beyond the immediate destruction of the world-renowned Weimar film culture. After their ascent to power in 1933, the Nazi regime blacklisted some 2,000 individuals in the German film industry due to their Jewishness<sup>37</sup>. Although many formerly German filmmakers initially tried to reestablish their careers in Europe, the United States gained a large percentage of the total number of exiles. In Los Angeles, many European émigrés helped to maintain a culture that revolved around salons, where German-speaking immigrants and refugees could discuss the issues of the day. Émigré salons played important roles in assisting new arrivals in

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<sup>36</sup> Stewart, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Horak, 373.

finding work and bringing together expatriate filmmakers, writers, musicians, and intellectuals.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the immediate scope of left-wing political mobilization and debate and the growing influence of anti-Nazi European émigrés on political discourse in the film capital, the content of Hollywood message films was also affected by a transformation in domestic audience tastes that demanded productions that had more relevance to their shifting economic and social concerns. The attempt to account for the problems faced by the American people in the wake of the Great Depression and overseas crises was one that transcended the national political spectrum, as Robert Sklar observes,

This loss of cultural certitudes had created a mood of shame and self-reproach in American society... and a sense of foreboding about the future. With the rise of Nazi Germany and the aggressive challenge to democratic ideals, the widespread doubt about traditional American myths threatened to become a dangerous political weakness. In politics, industry and the media there were men and women, as often of liberal as conservative persuasion, who saw the necessity, almost as a patriotic duty, to revitalize and refashion a cultural mythology.<sup>39</sup>

Lary May, in his history of Hollywood's construction of an American national identity during the Great Depression and the Second World War, argues that most social problem and message films produced during the 1930s reflected the necessity of reimagining the nation's republican identity and values through the lenses of ethnic hybridity and an economic populism that denounced, or at least made sport of the American ruling class. Historians have also noted that many Depression-era films specifically reflected and commented upon the tension between individual autonomy and the collective action that seemed to be necessary to solve the nation's problems. This would be memorably

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<sup>38</sup> Giovacchini, 77-81.

<sup>39</sup> Sklar, 196.

presented in films as disparate in genre and setting as Busby Berkeley's backstage musicals, King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* (1934), Frank Capra's string of populist hits (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* [1935], *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* [1939], and *Meet John Doe* [1941]), and social problem films such as Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936).<sup>40</sup>

In spite of the upswing of political activism and the number of left aligned associations in Hollywood, the major studios placed limitations on the production of film scenarios that frankly addressed political controversies and problems of any kind. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund emphasize that even the most politically conscious and radical screenwriters were obliged to separate their work at the studios from their political lives. Generally, the management at the major studios, especially the so-called moguls who managed the Los Angeles filmmaking centers for their parent companies on the East Coast, was far more conservative than their politically minded employees, though there were some similarities between the two groups. Like radical screenwriters and directors, most political activity in Hollywood participated in by the moguls occurred off set, primarily through the participation in mega-events such as rallies or fund-raising dinners, where many executives competed with each other to see who was willing to pledge the most to a particular cause or charity.<sup>41</sup> The realities of having to adhere to the MPPDA's Production Code, which was vigorously enforced through the Breen Office after 1934, reinforced an already cautious attitude from studio executives. This tendency towards caution had emerged since the end of the First World War from a desire to stave

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<sup>40</sup> Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000 [2002 ed.]), 94-95; Robé, 159.

<sup>41</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 49-50; Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988 [1989 ed.]), 288-291.

off Federal interference in their industry and by the need to appease the demands of a wide spectrum of possible censorship demands from across the United States and overseas. A producer as openly sympathetic to the Popular Front's antifascist and specifically anti-Nazi activism as independent Walter Wanger was generally rare during the 1930s.<sup>42</sup>

The presence of both "Hollywood New Yorkers" and "Hollywood Europeans" (to borrow Saverio Giovacchini's terminology)<sup>43</sup> in Los Angeles inspired an upsurge in associational activism in Hollywood, along with small spaces where individuals otherwise scattered across the industry and the city could discuss and debate the momentous and horrifying events occurring overseas. The single most influential Popular Front group in Los Angeles was the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL). The story of HANL's founding exemplified the apparent sincerity of the political left, both in Los Angeles and beyond, in building a politically ecumenical organization that would agitate against the domestic and international growth of fascism, in whatever form it took. The impetus for the founding of HANL was an April 26, 1936 talk given by the exiled German aristocrat and pacifist Prince Hubertus zu Loewenstein to a dinner audience on the dangers posed by Hitler's regime. This inaugural dinner for HANL attracted a supportive audience of just over 1,200 people drawn from across the political spectrum and social circles of Hollywood, from the radical left to the conservative Republican right, and including both radical screenwriters to conservative studio moguls. The dinner

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<sup>42</sup> Wanger, along with Twentieth-Century Fox's Darryl F. Zanuck and Warner Bros.' Jack and Harry Warner, became staunch interventionists and supporters of President Roosevelt's foreign policy during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

<sup>43</sup> Giovacchini, 51-54; *Ibid*, 64-71.

and mega-event exemplified a Popular Front organization at its most far-reaching and influential.<sup>44</sup> Although politically situated comfortably on the side of the Popular Front, and never enjoying a formal membership far above 4,200 people, HANL came to enjoy an influence beyond its actual size. Chaired by the top-ranked screenwriter and patrician-turned Communist sympathizer Donald Ogden Stewart, HANL served as a platform to agitate against the presence of both the Italian fascists and German Nazis in Hollywood, as well as a platform to facilitate lobbying the Federal government for harsher policies against the European dictatorships. The influence enjoyed specifically by HANL and the power of antifascist ideology in general was on full display in the campaigns directed against Vittorio Mussolini and Leni Riefenstahl during their respective visits to Hollywood.<sup>45</sup> One of the most visible impacts of HANL was the group's effectiveness in bringing its antifascist message to a wide audience, not least by using the trappings of all that the film capital's culture of spectacle could be brought to bear. In Saverio Giovacchini's words, "Whenever possible, HANL made sure that such activities took place in Hollywood's public spaces. Thanks to Donald Ogden Stewart's efforts, common citizens, usually not invited to [Salka] Viertel's parties, could now see [Joris] Ivens's *Spanish Earth* at the Roosevelt Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard."<sup>46</sup> Adding to this culture of progressive antifascist mega-events and political campaigning were the emergence of left-wing audience groups in the form of the New Film Alliance in 1935 and Associated

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<sup>44</sup> Doherty, 96-97.

<sup>45</sup> Doherty, 131-133, 305-310.

<sup>46</sup> Giovacchini, 84-85.

Film Audiences in 1937, which attempted to counter conservative, moralist organizations such as the Legion of Decency.<sup>47</sup>

The 1930s antifascist sentiment in Hollywood reached its zenith during and partially because of the Spanish Civil War. That conflict, waged between 1936 until 1939 between General Francisco Franco's rebel Nationalists and the beleaguered Popular Front Republican government in Madrid was an international event that animated the political left in the United States and around the world. The war was notable for the large number of artists and intellectuals who volunteered to fight on the side of the Republicans. In Los Angeles Popular Front organizations, including the Motion Picture Artists Committee to Aid Republican Spain (MPAC), the Anti-Franco League, and the a local branch of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee,<sup>48</sup> spearheaded efforts to fundraise for the Republican forces, similar to other campaigns around the nation to propagandize and fundraise for the Spanish government.<sup>49</sup> Pro-Republican committees exhibited documentaries that condemned the atrocities committed by Franco and his Italian and German allies against Spanish civilians, whose plight was made manifestly worse by the refusal of the US government to end its arms embargo on the warring parties in Spain but which, like the apparent British and French inaction, only benefited Franco, who could depend upon unlimited support from Rome and Berlin.

#### The collapse of the Hollywood Popular Front

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<sup>47</sup> Chris Robé, "Taking Hollywood Back: The Historical Costume Drama, the Biopic, and Popular Front U.S. Film Criticism," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Winter, 2009), 79.

<sup>48</sup> Welky, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 114-115.

Modern historians of Popular Front culture are careful to note that there is no single year that can be considered the termination of the movement, whether in 1939 or 1947.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the American entry into the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 spurred a second wartime Popular Front focused on supporting the campaign of a final, total victory over the Axis and the realization of a more just and internationalist world order. However, the announcement was still deleterious in its effects on organized anti-Nazi activism in the United States, especially in a Hollywood that was more receptive to the antifascist messages that organizations and pressure groups such as HANL had brought to bear for years than ever before. The announcement triggered an abrupt-face by the Communist Party, which now urged its members to work on keeping the United States out of the war between the Third Reich and the Western European democracies. The conflict was to be denounced as a war between identical systems of imperialism and exploitation. As screenwriter (and member of the Hollywood Ten) Paul Jarrico remembered,

People like us had been the chief organizers of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, which had become an important organization. Then one day we found ourselves rising in meetings of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and saying, "I think we ought to change the name of the organization...and we ought to change the policy...after all, the war is imperialist on both sides." Certainly nobody who was a serious anti-Nazi would follow our leadership out of the anti-Nazi camp.<sup>51</sup>

The announcement of the pact arrived on the heels of disheartening news from abroad, including the British and French appeasement of Hitler's territorial demands for

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<sup>50</sup> Denning, 24-27.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997 [1999 ed.]), 336.

the Sudetenland in the fall of 1938, the German conquest and dismemberment of what was left of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939, and the final triumph of Franco's Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War that same year. Those who stayed in the Communist Party fold were often deeply conflicted over what course to take, if their stance could be justified after years of trying to mobilize American society against the fascist dictatorships. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund attribute the decision by former Popular Front activists such as John Howard Lawson and Albert Maltz to remain in the Party to a mixture of youthful confusion and naïve ideological inflexibility that failed to comprehend the depth of the Soviet betrayal of the worldwide antifascist cause.<sup>52</sup> The announcement of the Non-Aggression Pact facilitated a split between those who remained devoted to the Communist line of peace, and those who came to support an internationalist, traditionally liberal worldview that advocated intervention to support the Allied cause. Screenwriters and directors who now filled the ranks of Hollywood-based organizations such as the European Film Fund (EFF) would contribute their talents to pro-interventionist message films that celebrated the British cause and was increasingly unafraid to state that Nazi Germany was a direct menace to the United States and the American way of life.<sup>53</sup> The ultimate effect of the Non-Aggression Pact, and the subsequent about-face in the Communist Party line regarding the struggle against

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<sup>52</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 175-177.

<sup>53</sup> Welky, 156. Notable interventionist films scripted or directed by liberal pro-interventionists and antifascists from 1939 to 1941 (many of whom who had supported Popular Front organizations in previous years) included *The Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>* (1940), *The Sea Hawk* (1940), *The Sea Wolf* (1941), and *Sergeant York* (1941), released by Warner Bros.; *Foreign Correspondent* (1941), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, produced by Walter Wanger, and released through United Artists; *Man Hunt* (1941) and *A Yank in the RAF* (1941), released by Twentieth-Century Fox.

Nazism, was the transformation of ostensibly non-sectarian organizations such as HANL little more than an eviscerated extension of the CPUSA. In the long term, this 1939 division also increased the isolation and vulnerability of left wing and radical activists in the film capital as anti-Communist politicians both in California and in Congress began to target the industry for its “subversive” and “un-American” tendencies in 1940 and 1941.<sup>54</sup>

In his history of American culture during the Great Depression, Morris Dickstein stresses that the 1930s was a time when the American people were rediscovered by artists and intellectuals and celebrated across political boundaries and cultural mediums.<sup>55</sup> The antifascist message films of the mid-to-late 1930s and early 1940s tempered positive visions of the American people with the dark side of collective action and the peoples’ collective experience.

## II

### WILLIAM DIETERLE’S ANTIFASCIST HISTORIES: *JUAREZ* AND THE BIOPIC CYCLE

#### The Popular Front and History Onscreen

In his essay on the left wing and radical film critics of the 1930s, Chris Robé notes that one of the consistent points of contention that these particular critics had with mainstream Hollywood imaginings of historical events was the emphasis placed on the interpersonal, often romantic relationships between members of the aristocracy over

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<sup>54</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 148-153.

<sup>55</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 528-530.

historical narratives that would place the people at the heart of the struggle for justice and equality. At worst, certain films seemed to demonize the masses that participated in events such as the French Revolution as an implacably hostile element to the happiness of the ruling class protagonists.<sup>56</sup> This skeptical portrayal of revolutionary violence as a panacea to injustice was generally consistent in the Hollywood studios' construction of historical events or interpretation of literary period pieces. To use the example of the 1939 RKO remake of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the yearning for knowledge of the student protagonist Gringoire (Edmond O'Brien) and the tolerance and enlightenment of King Louis XI (Harry Davenport) is contrasted both with the black-robed, violently anti-Gypsy proto-fascist Frollo (Cedric Hardwicke) and the savage Parisian mobs led by the gangster-like Clopin (Thomas Mitchell). The fact that Clopin is attempting to rescue Esmeralda (Maureen O'Hara) from the clutches of the eponymous Hunchback (and by extension Frollo) is irrelevant. A revolt against the established order must be rectified with Clopin's death and the mob's defeat.<sup>57</sup>

As in the case of the famous Soviet directors during the 1920s and early 1930s foreign filmmakers offered for those critics sympathetic to the political left exciting alternatives to the studio system's (and Breen Office-approved) vision of history. From the mid to late 1930s, France in particular seemed to point the direction towards a more progressive form of cinema, encapsulated by the Popular Front-aligned works of Jean Renoir. In particular, Renoir's *La Marseilles*, a 1938 release set during the opening years

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<sup>56</sup> Chris Robé, "Taking Hollywood Back: The Historical Costume Drama, the Biopic, and Popular Front U.S. Film Criticism," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Winter, 2009), 73-74.

<sup>57</sup> *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, directed by William Dieterle (1939; Turner Home Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

of the French Revolution, offered a clear contrast to Hollywood's celebration of the world of the powerful and famous. The film serves as a national pastoral of Revolutionary France. In chronicling the journey of a volunteer battalion from Marseilles to Paris to support the Assembly in their struggles against the failing Bourbon regime, Renoir's film is the story of how the Revolution transformed a realm of subjects into a nation of patriots ready to fight for its ideals against those who would attempt to bring about a return to the old order, or worse. At best, King Louis XVI and the aristocracy as a whole is shown to be out of touch with the new political and social realities. At worst, they are portrayed as the spiritual antecedents of the right-wing organizations and individuals in late 1930s France hostile to the Third Republic and sympathetic to the Third Reich. A group of exiled aristocrats in the German city of Coblenz openly express their hatred of the common people and celebrate the Revolution's imminent defeat at the hands of Prussia's Duke of Brunswick.<sup>58</sup> Renoir later recalled that his primary purpose in making *La Marseilles* was to refute the idea that the Revolutionaries of the 1790s (and their spiritual descendants in the 1930s Popular Front movement) were a danger to and outside of the acceptable political boundaries of the French Republic. Much of the dialogue of the film's Patriot protagonists from the town hall debates was drawn from the minutes of public meetings and assemblies uncovered by Renoir's researchers and the director's own studies of the era and events.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Grottle Strebel uses a key crowd

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<sup>58</sup> *La Marseilles*. DVD. Directed by Jean Renoir, 1938. Lions Gate, 2007. The term "coblentzard" was used during the Popular Front by the left to attack the right in France. (Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 (1990 ed.)], 312).

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Bergan, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1995), 182-183.

scene in *La Marseilles*, in which Marseille's Patriot volunteers prepare to leave for Paris, as an example of how Renoir was able to effectively demonstrate the ties of personal solidarity within a larger movement,

The whole way in which Renoir handles the crowd is illuminating...Renoir preferred to focus on isolated groups within the larger crowd. Avoiding fragmentive editing, he tracked back and forth with his camera to stress the organic bonds of solidarity between these groups...Although it was Renoir's predilection to film in this manner, it was also made effective propaganda for would-be converts, who might have been deterred by high, wide angle shots of huge crowds.<sup>60</sup>

There were important differences between the American and French film industries that offered more leeway to a director with clear political sympathies such as Renoir, beyond the separation in scale. French directors and screenwriters during their nation's Popular Front period benefited from a decentralized, artisanal system of production that afforded a significant opportunity for experimentation in technique and message.<sup>61</sup> In the absence of the willingness or ability of the major Hollywood studios to reorient their works of history towards a people-oriented progressive direction, left-aligned film critics found some solace in the possibilities by a staple of American filmmaking in the 1930s in the form of the biopic.<sup>62</sup>

#### William Dieterle in Hollywood

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, "Jean Renoir and the Popular Front" in K.R.M. Short, *Feature Films as History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 91.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 250-254.

<sup>62</sup> Robé, "Taking Hollywood Back," 79.

During the second half of the 1930s, William Dieterle was unique among the directors working in Hollywood. Dieterle, a émigré from Germany who had long been involved in the political left, came to enjoy a degree of artistic and creative control over his projects that was unusual in an era of when studio executives enjoyed great power over directors and screenwriters.<sup>63</sup> The source of this autonomy was a string of successful biopics that Dieterle directed for Warner Bros. from 1936 until 1940. The films of the cycle, which began with the unexpected 1936 commercial and critical hit *The Life of Louis Pasteur*, reached its critical and popular zenith with *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and continued with *Juarez* (1939) and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), were broadly similar to other films of the biopic genre—at a time when biopics were at their most popular as story ideas throughout the studio system. Each film chronicled the struggles by a great man to overcome personal and professional hardship to achieve a great discovery or right a great wrong, often in opposition to official approval and conventional wisdom. Dieterle's biopics attempted to convey for their audiences the triumph of science, reason, and democracy over intellectual and political reaction and prejudice. Radical and liberal critics, especially those associated with Popular Front-aligned publications, approved of the topicality of Dieterle's films, especially because they appeared to acknowledge the growing threat and inherent evils of fascism. In the aftermath of his successes with *The Life of Louis Pasteur* and *The Life of Emile Zola*, and coming off his work for Walter Wanger on the 1938 Spanish Civil War film *Blockade*, Dieterle now signed on to direct a new biopic on the life of the nineteenth century Mexican revolutionary Benito Juarez,

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<sup>63</sup> George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 66.

specifically chronicling Juarez's battle with the puppet emperor Maximilian and his wife Carlotta over the fate of his nation. As John Huston, one of the film's three screenwriters, later remembered, the film was intended to showcase a debate between those who believed in democracy, and those who believed in dictatorship.<sup>64</sup>

### Popular Front history, Good Neighbors, and *Juarez*

*Juarez* was intended to be, like the previous films in Dieterle's series, a vehicle for Paul Muni, among the most talented character actors under contract at Warner Bros. during the 1930s. *Juarez*, ostensibly about the struggle of Mexico's legitimately elected president Benito Juarez (Paul Muni) to liberate Mexico from the French invaders and their puppet emperor Maximilian von Hapsburg (Brian Aherne), serves as a parable to Nazi aggression in Europe and its threat to the democracies of the Western Hemisphere. The screenwriting team of Wolfgang Reinhardt, Aeneas MacKenzie, and John Huston highlighted this aspect of the film's central conflict.<sup>65</sup> The film examines the struggle between President Juarez, Emperor Maximilian, and Napoleon III, Emperor of France (Claude Rains) over the fate of Mexico. Napoleon III, who as of the film's opening has been engaged for years in a brutal war of conquest in Mexico under the guise of collecting French debts, is specifically identified and caricatured as a dictator. The monarch is hostile to the principles of representative democracy in general and to the United States in particular, snidely declaring that democracy is "The rule of the cattle by

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<sup>64</sup> John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980) 72-73.

<sup>65</sup> Welky, 108-110.

the cattle for the cattle...<sup>66</sup> This is reinforced in one of the film's penultimate scenes, in which Napoleon, viewed from the perspective of Maximilian's mentally unstable wife Carlotta (Bette Davis) at the moment of her nervous breakdown, is shown as a demonic entity.

Although he garners far more sympathy than the conniving Napoleon III, Emperor Maximilian is used to highlight the core of the conflict between dictatorship and democracy. Maximilian outwardly appears to be far more reasonable than his European sponsor and the reactionary forces in Mexican society who welcome the overthrow of the republic. Although the Habsburg nobleman is not a believer in democracy, the puppet emperor of Mexico, at the outset of his reign, is shown to genuinely care for the wellbeing of his subjects. He refuses to reverse Juarez's past policies of land redistribution to benefit his conservative Mexican allies, and initially resists the pleas of his French military advisor to begin a policy of systematic violent repression to stamp out Juarez's forces. His attempts to find common ground with Juarez founder over the Mexican president's devotion to the democratic process, a way of life now under attack from foreign imperialists, domestic reactionary traitors, and selfish, power-hungry factions within his own revolutionary party. Juarez's willingness to continue the popular war against Maximilian drives the emperor to accede to his advisor's plans of repression, mandating the death penalty for any Mexican captured with a weapon, which only serves to drive the masses even further into Juarez's camp. Thomas Doherty notes that the film also mocks the Nazi belief in Aryan racial superiority. The republican forces loyal to a

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<sup>66</sup> *Juarez*, ed. by Paul J. Vanderwood (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 70.

president who prides himself in his Indian ancestry ultimately rout the tall, fair-haired Maximilian and his traitorous Mexican allies.<sup>67</sup>

The production of the film was an example of the ways in which the major studios attempted to anticipate the Federal government's policies and produce message films that would make their industry indispensable to spreading a vital message. *Juarez* was a production meant to curry favor with the Roosevelt Administration regarding its foreign policy, and it reflected the common interest shared by the major studios and the State Department in preserving the Western Hemisphere from ideological inroads by the new Berlin-Rome Axis. During the late 1930s, as hostile fascist and authoritarian regimes shut them out of European markets, Latin America loomed larger in the minds of Hollywood's studio heads and the MPPDA as a vital source of foreign revenue. David Welky notes that the promotion of the Pan-American ideal through film was one of the areas in which Hollywood found that its interest intersected with that of the Roosevelt Administration.<sup>68</sup> Screenwriter John Huston, an aficionado for Mexican culture, pushed hard for the film's historical accuracy and helped to steer it away from including material that would have likely offended Mexican audiences.<sup>69</sup> The film also transformed Benito Juarez himself into a hero that American audiences could identify with. In his dress, speech, and political sentiment, the Mexican president is clearly modeled after Abraham Lincoln. A portrait of the sixteenth president is shown hanging behind Juarez in many scenes, and the picture accompanies Juarez wherever he is forced to flee to escape Maximilian's

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<sup>67</sup> Doherty, 347-348.

<sup>68</sup> Welky, 107-108.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

forces.<sup>70</sup> This Americanization of Juarez was a conscious decision both on the part of Paul Muni and the producers. During the Great Depression, the example set by Abraham Lincoln during the Union's last great moment of crisis became an important symbol across the country's political spectrum, and was frequently used by President Roosevelt in his attempts to justify his use of the Federal government's power to mitigate the worst effects of the Depression.<sup>71</sup> The film's association of Juarez with Lincoln also serves to highlight the wholly positive impact that the United States has on Mexico's democratic revolution. It's the United States that supplies the weapons vital for Juarez to continue his war even as he's been driven to the ends of Mexico. It's the United States that refuses to recognize Maximilian as the legitimate ruler of Mexico, and it's the United States, in the person of its ambassador to France that finally intimidates Napoleon III into withdrawing his support for Maximilian and his forces from Mexico under the aegis of the Monroe Doctrine.

Warner Bros. released *Juarez* the same year as its *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, and it was hoped for among Hollywood antifascists that Dieterle's newest biopic heralded the emergence of an American cinema that would make bold commentaries on the evils and dangers of the European dictatorships. However, *Juarez* ultimately premiered to mixed reviews. While most praised the messages shown onscreen (the defense of democracy, Pan-American solidarity, and a strong denunciation of dictatorship), Dieterle's film only managed to break even at the box office. In both the United States and in a number of Latin American nations, audiences reacted negatively to the overly long political

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>71</sup> Paul J. Vanderwood, introduction to *Juarez* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 28-33.

messages and the relative lack of action. In Mexico, the film inspired cynicism at the idea of the United States as the protector of their country, in light of the past US interventions and territorial acquisitions. The mixed reaction to *Juarez* was a sobering reminder to Warner Bros. executives that ideological messages films were risky investments, especially when brought to audiences as period pieces.

### The biopic cycle and anti-Semitism

Dieterle's cycle had reached the height of its popular and critical praise with *The Life of Emile Zola*, released in 1937 and winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture that same year. The film chronicles the career of the French radical journalist and novelist Emile Zola from his emergence as a writer of social realist novels through his defense of the framed Jewish captain Alfred Dreyfus from charges of high treason. As with the case of the other films of the cycle, *The Life of Emile Zola* presents its subject as an individual whose example should be emulated. The dramatic center of the film is Zola's campaign of support for the framed Dreyfus after the officer is arrested and dispatched by a military tribunal to serve a life sentence on Devil's Island. When Dreyfus is first arrested and then publically disgraced by the Army, Zola does not believe that he could possibly be innocent. It is only when he is presented of irrefutable evidence to the contrary that the old radical troublemaker publically accuses the General Staff of dishonoring France through their framing of an innocent man. In this regard, *The Life of Emile Zola* is similar to other functions of biopics during the Golden Age of Hollywood, which was to provide a "public history" that would provide acceptable role models for the people at large.

Throughout Dieterle's series of films, the crowd is often portrayed as the most terrifying manifestation of societal disintegration and as the harbingers of reactionary forces within institutions or governments. In *The Life of Emile Zola* and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, both titular characters are the victims of public campaigns of defamation that leads to them being targeted by hostile crowds. Although both heroes are advocates of policies that will benefit society as a whole, the inherent goodness of their respective ideas and opinions is not enough by themselves to halt the hostile forces arrayed against them. The expressions of popular and institutional anger in both *The Life of Emile Zola* and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* also share a glaring omission in their public histories, namely the impact that anti-Semitism had on the careers of the men whose lives they portrayed.

The Dreyfus Affair, the scandal that had shaken the foundations of the Third Republic by its exposure of the institutional and popular anti-Semitism of turn-of-the-century France, had been filmed many times before the 1937 release, including a 1930 German production and a 1931 British film starring Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Dreyfus.<sup>72</sup> The Warner Bros. 1937 film, through the lens of a biopic of Emile Zola, transferred the institutional anti-Semitism of the French general staff into a universal injustice that according to the film's narrative could just as well revolved around Dreyfus's alienation from the aristocratic officers who dominate the French government and general staff. These omissions were not accidental, and they reflected the unwillingness within both the studio system and the MPPDA's Breen Office to countenance any subject that would

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<sup>72</sup> Steven Carr, *Hollywood & Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 208.

potentially inflame religious or national prejudices. Breen himself warned Jack Warner against including any scene that could be construed as propaganda, specifically complaining of a scene in which a mob burns Zola's books,

...The inclusion of these scenes in your picture may leave your picture open to the accusation that it is propaganda and, as such, unworthy of serious notice. We suggest that, throughout the script, where there is danger that this suggestion of propaganda be drawn, you eliminate the scenes or dialogue responsible for such suggestion.<sup>73</sup>

The studio ensured that the actual reasons for Dreyfus's persecution would be obscured in the final release. Jack Warner intervened early to order the removing of all references of Dreyfus's Jewishness from the script, which was acceded to by Dieterle.<sup>74</sup>

In spite of the general omission of the anti-Semitism underlying the Dreyfus Affair, many reviewers praised the film for showcasing what a message film could accomplish with all of the resources of the studio system brought to bear on a project that commented on contemporary injustices through a historical setting. Frank Nugent, writing in *The New York Times*, argued that the film's most powerful impact stemmed from the way in which Zola himself personified the commitment to state the truth in the face of popular bigotry and hatred:

There is something infinitely touching in the contrast of the physical Zola and the spiritual Zola. One a human, frail, pathetic, at times a quaint figure; but behind him always, in his writings and utterances, the steadfast tread of truth on the march and our grateful knowledge, with him, that "nothing will stop her." And that has been written into the film, just as it has been written into history, and when a picture has that spiritual surge it has realized the best the cinema can accomplish.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Welky, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Frank S. Nugent, "The Life of Emile Zola" in *The New York Times*, August 12, 1937. Accessed May 12, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173FE46FBC4A52DFBE66838C629EDE>

In a similar vein, Peter Ellis, writing in *The New Masses*, praised the film for even the brief allusion to Dreyfus's Jewishness by highlighting Dieterle's use of quick shots (and the snide dialogue of the other General Staff officers) for standing in for a denunciation of Hitler's regime.<sup>76</sup> This form of criticism is illustrative of the hopes of the political left that Hollywood was moving in a more sympathetic direction.

The story regarding the presence of anti-Semitism in *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* was less straightforward. The film is the story of the struggles of the nineteenth century German-Jewish scientist Dr. Paul Ehrlich to discover a cure for syphilis. In the original idea for the biopic, the issue of German anti-Semitism was far more prominent. The original treatment by the Jewish New York transplant Norman Burnstine proposed a direct connection between the bigotry endured by Dr. Ehrlich in Wilhelmine Germany and the modern anti-Semitism of the Third Reich. The central conflict of the film would be between Dr. Ehrlich and a proto-Nazi named Dr. von Wolfert, with Ehrlich explicitly identified as a Jewish doctor and scientist.<sup>77</sup> The disputes that surrounded the planning stages of his biopic were instructive of the divisions that had erupted within Hollywood's progressive community in the wake of the collapse of the Popular Front in August 1939. Burnstine's original treatment was redone to remove the issue of German anti-Semitism as a visible element to the story, which Burnstine unsuccessfully argued against. In a letter to the Screen Writer's Guild to settle the issue of screenwriting credits for the film, one of the writers brought in to touch up the script, the émigré Wolfgang Reinhardt,

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Ellis, "The Life of Emile Zola, by William Dieterle" in *The New Masses*, August 17, 1937, accessed May 12, 2015. <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewMasses-1937aug17-00029>

<sup>77</sup> Giovacchini, 117.

confirmed the greater alterations that had occurred over the film's content and story: "For the director, Ehrlich's historical importance is less about being a Jew than about being another 'idol of mass communication,' fighting to make scientific culture available and accessible to the multitudes."<sup>78</sup> For all their daring commentary on societal prejudice and political injustice, Dieterle's biopic cycle was also reflective of Hollywood's removal of any content regarding "Jewish" issues, or portrayals of Jews themselves. Antifascist message films, especially those made towards the end of the decade, would generally be expressed in terms of universal support for justice and objection to tyranny. This official reluctance to acknowledge the realities of Jewish suffering went hand in hand with ideological misconceptions on the part of a large segment of the antifascist left regarding the Nazis' anti-Semitic worldview. Saverio Giovacchini notes that for most anti-Nazi activists in Hollywood during the 1930s, anti-Semitism was seen as a consequence of the regime's dictatorship, rather than a central pillar of the Third Reich's ideology.<sup>79</sup> At best, anti-Semitism was a symptom of a broader array of problems and atrocities occurring in Germany.

But if the Hollywood studio system refused to openly portray the facts of even historical anti-Semitism, were there any alternatives to a genre as popular and friendly to the antifascist left as the biopic? Were there foreign filmmaking techniques and forms of narrative that could be more forthright on the atrocities being committed in the Third Reich against its Jewish population? One Soviet release brought to the United States over a year after *The Life of Emile Zola*, seemed from the perspective of those who wanted a

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 103-105.

more daring wave of antifascist films to offer a plausible alternative.

### III

#### RECENT ANTI-NAZI HISTORY: *PROFESSOR MAMLOCK* ON AMERICAN SCREENS

During the 1930s, the options for circulation in the United States for foreign language films and especially those imports which did not enjoy a seal of approval from the MPPDA, were limited to small networks of independent or art house theaters, concentrated in New York City. Soviet feature films were especially limited in terms of critical visibility and commercial viability. Since 1926, the Amkino Corporation had overseen the distribution of Soviet films in the United States. By the late 1930s, a small number of mostly-New York based theaters, most prominently the 600-seat Cameo, served as venues for their limited audience.<sup>80</sup> During the years of the Popular Front, Soviet anti-Nazi message films sought broader international audiences with the intention of courting liberal public opinion in the West. *Professor Mamlock*, directed by Adolf Minkin and Herbert Rapaport, and inspired by the novel written by the German Communist exile Friedrich Wolf, was one of three Soviet feature films released in 1938 that promoted a message of international antifascist solidarity with the Western democracies. These three films (*Professor Mamlock*, *The Oppenheim Family*, and *Swamp Soldier*) were each based on novels written by German émigré writers and each of the

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<sup>80</sup> Doherty, 186-187.

three films centered on the plight of Jews under the Nazi regime.<sup>81</sup> Out of these three 1938 releases, *Professor Mamlock* arguably had the widest impact in the West. It enjoyed positive reception that had not received by any Soviet film since the heyday of the country's famous experimental directors of the 1920s. The film was one of the few released anywhere in the late 1930s that frankly broached the topic of the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, an issue that roared to the surface of the world's headlines during the film's initial international run in the aftermath of Germany's absorption of Austria, the crisis over Czechoslovakia, and the pogroms of *Kristallnacht*. Not beholden to the same commercial concerns as those of the Hollywood studios, especially those concerns about the reception of their products in foreign countries, Soviet films about Nazism, however didactic and logically contestable, were able to frankly link the fascist dictatorships with the contemporary problems of racial prejudice and anti-Semitism.

The film opens on the day of the Reichstag Fire (February 27, 1933), and chronicles the destruction of the insular, comfortable world of Dr. Hans Mamlock, who is beloved by his patients and respected by most of his colleagues at the Berlin hospital where he is employed. Thomas Doherty notes the importance that this film places on the Reichstag Fire, and the subsequent purge of Germany's Communists in establishing an acceptable canon in the history of Communist martyrdom.<sup>82</sup> Even as Mamlock finds himself removed from his position and job and ritualistically humiliated with the word "JUDE" crudely painted onto his white surgeon's gown, his son Rolf becomes an enthusiastic member of the growing Communist underground, castigating his father's

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<sup>81</sup> Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>82</sup> Doherty, 189.

faith in a bourgeois progress and decency inherent in a comfortable, liberal, scientific existence, already made superfluous by both the future inevitability of Communism and the present depredations of the agents of Nazism. At one point he offers a retort to his father's faith in scientific progress by adding the names of Marx and Lenin to the scientific canon of Pasteur and Koch.<sup>83</sup> Although Mamlock is momentarily restored to his post when an important Nazi functionary requires an extraordinary difficult surgery, the doctor is ultimately brought low with a gunshot wound. The film ends on a high-note with Mamlock condemning Nazism for all of its crimes to an assembled crowd below his hospital balcony and finally embracing the worldview of his son—and by extension, the growing and widespread worker's resistance movement implacably opposed to Hitler's regime.

*Professor Mamlock* was a popular success in the Soviet Union, where 370,000 cinemagoers saw the film at sixteen Moscow theaters in the first eight days of its run.<sup>84</sup> It seemed from the perspective of the Soviet authorities that the film successfully balanced its sympathetic portrayal of Mamlock's plight with the necessary tropes that glorified Communist resistance to Nazism. One of the strengths of *Professor Mamlock* was its seemingly accurate portrayal of everyday life under the rule of the Nazi Party, a nightmarish world of brutal violence and economic calamity for the general population. Unlike earlier Soviet portrayals of Germany, *Professor Mamlock* benefited from Adolf Minkin's wide-ranging experience in the Weimar Republic's film industry, which allowed the film's sets and street scenes to closely resemble the Berlin of 1933. Thomas

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>84</sup> Hicks, 28.

Doherty notes that the film, while well received for a topical Soviet production of the Popular Front years, maintains the mistaken assumption that there was in 1933, and at the time of *Professor Mamlock*'s 1938-1939 run, a significant anti-Nazi resistance movement rooted in the German working class.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, Western critics and audiences sympathetic to the Popular Front or the Soviet Union were relieved to be able to offer praise for a Soviet film that could stand on its own aesthetic merits. The relative critical and commercial success enjoyed by *Professor Mamlock* in New York City emboldened Nicola Napoli, Amkino's American manager, to apply for a seal of approval from the PCA. The Breen Office granted the seal in 1939 under prodding by Francis Harmon, the head of the PCA's East Coast branch. Harmon argued that the Production Code itself was not intended to protect foreign nations from unreasonable criticism, especially in light of escalating Nazi atrocities, observing,

This section does not state that the people and other nations must always be portrayed sympathetically. It says "fairly" and in our judgment the scenes portrayed are an accurate reflection of what has actually taken place inside Nazi Germany. In fact the present German government has boasted of just such incidents as are herein portrayed.<sup>86</sup>

Harmon's defense of the film was an acknowledgement that it was unfair and unrealistic to expect filmmakers to avoid the manifest dangers of Nazism, or of topical subjects in general that touched upon international controversies. Critics praised the film for its topicality and its daringness in openly exploring and condemning the Nazis' anti-Semitic program, and although a number of state and city censorship boards (most notoriously Chicago's), attempted to ban the film from their screens, these restrictions were

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<sup>85</sup> Doherty, 192-193.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Doherty, 194.

successfully challenged in court by Amkino.<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, for all of the praise that *Professor Mamlock* generated in the West, the film was the victim of changing geopolitical circumstances that re-oriented the Soviet Union away from seeking a foreign policy based upon collective security against the fascist powers. With the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, the film was pulled from circulation. Like Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, *Professor Mamlock* would only be allowed back onto Soviet screens after the German invasion of the USSR began in June of 1941.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Hicks, 36.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

CHAPTER TWO:  
MODERN TIMES

## I

### A PANORAMA OF CINEMATIC CENSORSHIP, 1934-1941

From its earliest days as a popular art form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cinema was a medium that was subjected to vociferous criticism and attempted censorship throughout the United States. These calls for censorship were often rooted in moralist campaigns undertaken by religious organizations that condemned film as posing a special danger to uninformed audiences. Critics of motion picture exhibition argued that since it was impossible to cleave audiences into “high-brow” or “low-brow” classes as in the case of the theater or literature, film posed particular dangers to social stability if the wrong images and words were projected onscreen. The fact that films seemed to appeal especially to working class and immigrant audiences reinforced fears of moral debasement on the part of would-be censors. By the dawn of the 1930s, censorship systems had developed at both local and national levels across the United States, within the Hollywood studio system, and had become an important facet of American cultural diplomacy. During this decade, the politics of film censorship was an important factor in determining what audiences could be shown, what messages would be allowed, and what contemporary controversies were permissible for discussion on the part of producers, directors, and screenwriters. Gregory Black, in his study of the Catholic campaigns to censor American cinema during the 1930s, has noted that the campaigns against moral iniquity in films was also rooted in a hostility on the part of anti-movie groups to the exhibition of any film that openly discussed the country’s topical social problems or

political controversies.<sup>89</sup> This hostility extended to films that criticized the state of race relations, openly showed violence erupting between the labor movement and corporate management, or films that admitted that there were significant numbers of Americans who were willing to believe in the promises of demagogues and anti-democratic ideas as a solution for the crises spawned by the Great Depression. From 1930 until 1934, the Hollywood studios were subjected to the threat of national boycotts on the part of Catholic lay organizations such as the Legion of Decency over their apparent refusal to closely adhere to the Production Code written by Father Daniel Lord and lay Catholic film critic Martin Quigley in 1930 with the support of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors (MPPDA) head Will Hays. The Code prohibited any frank portrayals of sexuality, swearing, or disrespectful portrayals of foreign nations.<sup>90</sup> The implementation of the Code was agreed to in 1934 by an industry anxious as to the possible effects a concerted Church-led boycott could have after the collapse of box office revenue during the worst years of the Great Depression.

The inauguration of the Production Code Administration under the leadership of Joseph Breen had a significant effect on the production of films that in the early 1930s seemed to have been moving towards increasingly frank discussions of sex, organized crime, and moral quandaries created by desperate economic circumstances. The favored tactic that Breen and his staff used to wield control over studio releases was to quickly establish his office's stake in the content of a proposed project. Breen would often initially reject a story proposal or script and then work with the studio to guide the

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<sup>89</sup> Gregory Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84-87.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 307-308.

content of the film into a direction that would be acceptable to both moralist groups and to his office.<sup>91</sup> The drive to control the content of film, rather than subject the industry to an outright ban of all controversial subjects that some anti-movie groups demanded enhanced the standing of the PCA in Hollywood, where power was greatly respected. Breen was also a staunch anti-Semite, firmly believing that it was up to his office to force the mostly Jewish moguls to move towards a more moral direction in terms of film content.<sup>92</sup> This bigotry was openly expressed in correspondence with both Will Hays and the Catholic religious and lay leaders involved in the pro-censorship campaigns of the pre-Code years, as well as in the years after the Code was rigorously enforced on the part of the PCA. Gregory Black notes that there is no evidence in the archives of the recipients of Breen's invectives objecting to his assertions that it was the Jews involved in Hollywood who were responsible for the abysmal moral tone of American commercial cinema.<sup>93</sup> Breen, in his capacity as the chief censor within the film capital, was one of the few individuals who could browbeat studio heads as powerful as Columbia's Harry Cohn, Warner Bros.' Jack Warner, and MGM's Louis B. Mayer. The power of the threat of censorship is an important fact to consider in contextualizing the political content of Hollywood's Golden Age output. Pro-censorship campaigns and the influence of the PCA often augmented the fear that the studio moguls felt themselves as to the possibility of allowing the production of subjects that dealt with specifically "Jewish" concerns, such as the deteriorating situation of the Jews in Germany and throughout Europe at the hands of the Nazis and other anti-Semitic movements.

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<sup>91</sup> Black, 171.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 70-71.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

The Breen Office, in spite of the power and influence that it came to enjoy by the end of the 1930s, also worked in a collaborative environment that consistently forced them to negotiate with the studios over what could or could not be shown in their productions. This collaborative process over the trajectory of film content was often extended to foreign governments, which was a practice rooted in the earliest struggles between the MPPDA and major foreign governments over productions that outraged their respective domestic audiences in the 1920s. The considerations of foreign governments were an early and important consideration for the major Hollywood studios even as their share of the international market far surpassed that of their closest competitors. These were considerations rooted in the fear of their studios being subjected to national bans from lucrative markets if their productions were to offend the national sensibilities of the societies and governments in question. By the end of the 1930s, there was a tendency to discourage potentially incendiary message films on the grounds of “industry policy” a term that expanded upon the Code’s brief promises to ensure that foreign nations would be fairly represented onscreen to preclude any content that would jeopardize the studio releases overseas.<sup>94</sup>

Negotiating and attempting to avoid controversy with foreign governments became an accepted price of doing business around the world for the Hollywood studios and these negotiations affected the choices made by producers and screenwriters regarding a film’s proposed location, how the actors would speak, what they would wear, and what (if any) acceptable national or cultural symbols would be present on set during

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<sup>94</sup> Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 202-206.

production. During the 1930s, consuls in Los Angeles were unafraid to condemn any offensive portrayal of their respective nations. In order to avoid a costly battle with foreign governments that could jeopardize their total output, the studios often encouraged their filmmakers to create nebulous fictional settings that would avoid being associated with any particular nation or people. These trends also affected the choice made by producers for the antagonists of any given picture. For most of the interwar period many of the foreign “heavies” used in feature films were Russians, owing in part to the probative Soviet governmental restrictions on American products that precluded any consideration for that nation’s national feelings.<sup>95</sup> Another trend from 1930s cinema that Ruth Vasey notes is the popularity of “mythical kingdoms”, which could not be identified with any actual nation or people but still drew upon popular stereotypes in their portrayal of the fictional society’s peoples and institutions.<sup>96</sup>

The willingness of the major Hollywood studios and the MPPDA to cooperate with foreign governments ran aground on the shoals of the escalating international tensions of the mid-to-late 1930s. Both Hays and Joseph Breen found themselves embroiled in a growing number of disputes with foreign governments over the threat of universal bans on Hollywood’s releases during the late 1930s, especially with the growth in international influence of the European dictatorships. The Italians under Benito Mussolini and the Germans under Adolf Hitler (joined by the Japanese government later in the decade) pursued policies intended to purify their respective national cultures of foreign influence and autarkic economic policies that sought to keep as much hard

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<sup>95</sup> Vasey, 52-54.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 115-119.

currency from being exported as possible.<sup>97</sup> These measures, combined with the American domestic upswing of antifascist sentiment, was a significant catalyst in encouraging several of the major Hollywood studios to produce films that would be more explicit in denunciation of fascism, specifically of Nazi Germany. The film capital was also concerned at the apparent growth in German influence in the Western Hemisphere, where a protest from Berlin or Rome over the content of American films could get the offending production banned from local screens. The frustrations caused by the hostile cultural diplomacy of Germany and Italy during the 1930s went hand in hand with the growing impact of a generation of anti-Nazi and antifascist émigrés who began to alter the aesthetics and messages of socially conscious American cinema, which was shaped by both a collective opposition to Nazism and the individual experiences of persecution.

## II

### BENEATH THE SURFACE: *FURY* AND *BLACK LEGION*

#### *Fury* and its world

“I roll the camera forward as a man would walk and thus approach the jail. The audience becomes the mob and together we move along up the streets and finally directly up to the sheriff himself.”<sup>98</sup>

-Fritz Lang, describing a key shot from *Fury* to radio host Jimmie Vandiveer,

1936.

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<sup>97</sup> Welky, 49-53.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Giovacchini, 69.

One of the stories that Fritz Lang enjoyed telling to anyone who inquired was a dramatic tale of being offered command of the entire German film industry by Josef Goebbels, the Reich's powerful minister for culture and propaganda. In Lang's narrative the story ended with him leaving Germany the very next day.<sup>99</sup> Although this story, like many Lang told about life and films is little more than a fantasy, it does reveal the dislocation that even a filmmaker of Lang's stature experienced in leaving Germany for Hollywood after the ascension of the Nazi regime. His emigration furthered a break with his famous works of fantasy and science fiction of the 1920s. Although several major Hollywood producers pushed Lang to direct similar projects under their auspices, the émigré was more interested in projects invested in social realism. The first film that he directed for a Hollywood studio—*Fury*, for MGM—would be closer to *M* than to *Metropolis*.<sup>100</sup> Released in 1936, *Fury* is one of the most memorable cinematic artifacts of Lang's association with the political left in 1930s Hollywood. Although Lang, like Jean Renoir after the Second World War, later downplayed his involvement in any form of prewar political activism, he was far more involved with antifascist causes and Popular Front associations than he was willing to admit. During the mid-to-late 1930s, Lang lent his support to both the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and the European Film Fund. The director was also a member of the salon culture that emerged in Los Angeles around the German-speaking exile community. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this kind of left-wing political consciousness in Lang's professional and personal life was the correspondence and contacts with left-wing intellectuals and artists that he developed in

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<sup>99</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [2013 ed.]), 178-181.

<sup>100</sup> Giovacchini, 66-67.

the wake of his immediate arrival in Hollywood.<sup>101</sup>

*Fury* chronicles the tribulations of Joe Wilson (Spencer Tracy), a successful garage owner engaged to the beautiful Katherine Grant (Sylvia Sidney). At the start of the film, Joe is a paragon of civic virtue. He successfully shepherds his two younger brothers away from alcoholism and their budding association with a Chicago racketeer. Separated from his fiancée by the need to save money for their wedding, Joe is eventually able to save enough from his new business to buy a new car to go to meet her, driving from Chicago into the rural hinterlands of the Midwest. Lost on a back road, Joe is arrested by a sheriff's deputy from the small town of Strand on suspicion that he is involved in a front-page kidnapping case. Brought before the town's sheriff, Joe is thrown into jail based on circumstantial evidence. What follows is one of the most terrifying montages in the history of American cinema. The sheriff's deputy implies to his friends at a barbershop that their office has managed to capture one of the gangsters behind the kidnapping, sparking a town-wide game of telephone. It isn't long before many of the townsfolk, gathered in a local dive to complain about the sheriff's refusal to divulge further details on the case, are enraptured by the demagoguery of Dawson, a local crook. Dawson urges the assembled people to have some "fun" at Joe's expense. Although the sheriff is assured of support from the state government in quelling the unrest, the governor reneges when one of his political advisors persuades him that it would be bad form to send soldiers to the town during an election year. In Strand, a mob consisting of all of the townsfolk, men, women, and children alike, assaults the jail where Joe is held, knocking out the sheriff and driving away his deputies. Unable to get at Joe

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 67.

himself through the bar doors, the mob sets fire to the jail, which is finally blown up by dynamite when two members of the mob decide to leave nothing but a crater for the authorities to find. Katherine witnesses Joseph being consumed by fire and faints just before the explosion.<sup>102</sup>

The second half of the film explores the fallout of the lynching, as the District Attorney, at the instigation of Joe's brothers, indicts twenty-two members of the mob (including Dawson) for murder. Unbeknownst to the DA or anyone else, Joe is alive, having miraculously escaped the jail when it was blown up, enduring severe burns in the process. However, the once law-abiding Joe is now consumed with hatred and with the help of his brothers he decides to take revenge on the people of Strand by making them endure a hangman's noose of their own, albeit with a trial first to establish their guilt for the entire world to witness. From the shadows of his brothers' apartment, Joe directs the prosecution to victory, which is all but assured by newsreel footage admitted as evidence that captures many of the defendants in the middle of their rampage. When the defense attorney claims that there is no evidence that Wilson is actually dead a letter written in cut-out magazine letters by an anonymous resident of Strand suddenly appears proclaiming the guilt of the suspects, and offers the burned, partially melted ring given by Katherine to Joe at the start of the film as the proof that Wilson was murdered.<sup>103</sup>

Katherine, called as a witness herself for the prosecution, realizes upon hearing the letter read that Joe is alive, and that he authored the letter himself (which had a misspelling that he has often made). Celebrating the imminent conviction and certain

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<sup>102</sup> *Fury*. DVD. Directed by Fritz Lang, 1936. Warner Home Video, 2005.

<sup>103</sup> *Fury*.

execution of the defendants with his brothers, Joe is confronted by Katherine, who urges him to end the ruse and thus to save the lives of the doomed men and women on trial. Although he angrily refuses at first, an attempted night on the town ruined by the sounds and ghost-like images of the defendants finally drives Joe to admit to the judge, after most of the defendants have been found guilty, that he orchestrated the trial to satisfy his own desire for revenge. This rings somewhat hollow over the happy ending. Joe absolutely refuses to forgive the townsfolk of Strand for their assault, and his faith in the fairness and justice of American society remains shattered.<sup>104</sup>

#### What kind of an anti-lynching film?

Fritz Lang, reflecting on *Fury* decades later, claimed that his film had been unable to portray an anti-black lynch mob due to a combination of studio pressure and pressure from the Breen Office, both of which were rooted in the pervasive racism in the upper management of both MGM that dismissed any proposal for serious portrayal of African-American characters. His latest biographer has discounted Lang's assertions.<sup>105</sup> The incident that inspired screenwriter Norman Krasna's initial scenario for *Fury* had been the 1933 San Jose, California mob lynching of two kidnapping and murder suspects, while Spencer Tracey had always been attached to star as the film's protagonist<sup>106</sup> Even if it had been Lang's intention to portray African-Americans as the primary victims of lynch mob violence in the United States, the fear of provoking a negative reaction from

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<sup>104</sup> *Fury*.

<sup>105</sup> McGillgan, 227.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 223-224.

the South would have precluded such a Hollywood film in the mid-1930s.<sup>107</sup> Chris Robé notes that radical and left wing film critics played an important role in constructing *Fury* as a production that attempted to address the continuing horrors of lynch-mob violence as directed against African-Americans.<sup>108</sup>

Recent analysis of *Fury* has tended to focus on the ways in which Lang's production articulated a negative image of the American people from the perspective of a refugee from Nazism and anti-Semitism. Vincent Brook, in his history of the impact of Jewish émigré directors on the development of film noir, argues that Lang effectively transforms Spencer Tracy's Joe Wilson into an Americanized manifestation of the persecuted European Jew. Joe is wrenched from his domestic idyll by the persecutory violence seething beneath the surface of small-town America. One of the most deeply disturbing aspects of *Fury* is not just the actual violence committed by the mob, but the sequences that show the mob's formation and sideline actions. This is graphically illustrated in Strand's barbershop almost immediately before the creation of the mob, in which the barber admits to his customers,

“People get funny impulses. If you resist them, you're sane. If you don't, you're on your way to the madhouse or the pen...Now, Mr. Jorgenson [*sitting in the barber's chair for a shave*] you've got one of the levellest heads in the county. Would you believe in the twenty years that I've been stroking this razor across throats here that many a'time I've had an impulse to cut their Adam's apples wide open?...An impulse is an impulse. You've got to scratch it.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> This kind of obfuscation on the identity of victims of lynching in the South was present in the Warner Bros. feature film *They Won't Forget* (1937). Although the story was based on the 1915 anti-Semitic conviction and lynching of Jewish factory owner Leo Frank in Marietta, Georgia, the film reimagines the analogue to Frank as a schoolteacher from the North, turning the story of one of the only known anti-Semitic ritual murder in American history into a critique of sectional politics and local demagoguery.

<sup>108</sup> Robé, 165-180.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, 163.

In Lang's imagery, the boundaries between the civilization inherent in America's laws and the bored fascistic sadism in its ordinary people are nebulous at best. The police deputies in Strand are abandoned by the governor and are overwhelmed by the mob. Afterwards the town's sheriff collaborates with the perpetrators to head off the justice of the state by lying on the witness stand. Possibly the most radical aspect of *Fury*, as Chris Robé notes, is Lang's indictment of his audience for enjoying the spectacle of the protagonist's murder, spoken by Joe after he is reunited with his brothers midway through the film. Recounting with growing rage his watching incognito a newsreel of the lynch mob in Strand, Joe exclaims,

“You know where I've been all day? In a movie, watching a newsreel, of myself, burned alive. I watched it ten times or twenty maybe, over and over again, I don't know how much. The place was packed. They like it, they get a big kick out of seeing a man burned to death. A big kick!”<sup>110</sup>

This imagery echoes the carnival-like atmosphere that Lang brings to before and during the mob's journey to and attack upon the prison. A boy leads the jeering that drowns out the sheriff when he tells them to disperse, a mother tries to give her daughter a better view of the assault, and a man eagerly devours a hot dog as he watches the apparent carnage unfold.<sup>111</sup> The newsreel footage that captures the assault on the prison shows two of the accused, a man and a woman, silently laughing with maniacal glee as they vandalize fire-fighting equipment and hurl projectiles in Joe's direction. The film's ending portrays the judiciary, and by extension the state government, as a bulwark against this demagogue-incited mob violence. The positive role played by the judiciary in

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009) 87.

<sup>111</sup>Roffman and Purdy, 167.

combating fascist terror would become a staple of antifascist 1930s American cinema. A Warner Bros. release a year after *Fury* would examine the impact of terrorism and mass violence in the nation's industrial heartland. The ending, for its extolling of the judicial process, would be even more bittersweet than that of *Fury*.

### *Black Legion*

In 1937, Warner Bros. released its first film that openly criticized domestic American fascist movements and demagogues. *Black Legion*, starring Humphrey Bogart as worker-turned nightrider Frank Taylor, explored the willingness of an ordinary working-class man driven by his frustrations, failures, and prejudice to throw away his career, his family, and ultimately his life in the name of an anti-American terrorist movement. Bogart's Taylor, a respected factory worker, is led to believe that he's a shoe-in for promotion to foreman due to his seniority and his general popularity with the other men. When the Polish-American Joe Dumbrowski is promoted instead Taylor, humiliated and angry, is first attracted to the Black Legion via the siren call of a radio demagogue whose voice is modeled after the notorious anti-Semitic radio priest Father Charles Coughlin.<sup>112</sup> The radio announcer blames the plight of the American working class on immigrants, and calls upon those threatened and dispossessed by foreigners to defend their country in a new fraternal organization. Taylor joins the Legion under the influence of fellow factory worker Joseph Sawyer (Cliff Moore) and their leader, a pharmacist named Osgood (Charles Halton). Taylor is elated after he and his fellow Legion members

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<sup>112</sup> Birdwell, 50.

drive Dumbrowski and his elderly immigrant father out of town and burns down their farm. Afterwards he finds himself accepted by a close network of friends, albeit friends who will kill him and his family if he ever leaves or turns on them. His life in the Legion culminates in the murder of his friend Ed Jackson (Dick Foran), who having ferreted out Taylor's double life, had tried to escape a Legion flogging only to be shot down by his former friend in panic. In the climax of the film, Taylor, on trial for murder and about to get off by way of a carefully concocted story, breaks down and confesses his guilt, and identifies the other members of the Legion present in the courtroom. Taylor and his former confederates are sentenced to life imprisonment by the presiding judge, who castigates them for following an ideology that runs antithetical to everything that the Constitution and basic morality stands for.<sup>113</sup>

### Gangsters and nightriders

*Black Legion* shares many aspects with the classic gangster pictures released by Warner Bros. in the early 1930s (*Little Caesar* [1931], *The Public Enemy* [1931], and *Scarface* [1932]). The role was familiar territory for Bogart, who had first attracted critical attention for his role as the brutal fugitive bank robber Duke Mantee in the studio's 1935 adaptation of Robert E. Sherwood's antiwar play *Petrified Forest*. First and foremost, it is the Black Legion's criminal deviancy that places it outside of the acceptable boundaries of a normal American community, reinforced by the fact that all of Frank's Legion activities, from his blood-curdling initiation ceremony to the group's

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<sup>113</sup> *Black Legion*. DVD. Directed by Archie Mayo, 1937. Warner Home Video, 2008.

terrorist attacks occur at night.<sup>114</sup> The willingness and eagerness of these domestic fascists to commit criminal acts is shown as rooted in the petty failures and frustrations of its members as workers and as men. Any happiness found in the Black Legion by a man like Taylor is illusory. Like the narratives of the earlier cycle of Great Depression gangster films, rapid success in a criminal outfit leads to an inevitable fall. Even after the Black Legion drives away Dumbrowski and clears the way for Taylor to take his place as factory foreman, he just as quickly loses the position for focusing more time and energy recruiting new Legion members instead of supervising the floor's machines. The mask of lies that Taylor constructs around his membership in the gang, along with losing his job, eventually drives away his wife and son, thus driving him into the waiting embrace of alcohol and town floosy Pearl Danvers.<sup>115</sup> The highest ranks of the Legion are no better than its foot soldiers in either masculinity or economic success. For all of its blood curdling rhetoric about protecting the jobs of all "true" Americans, this group of desperadoes is revealed to be controlled by a distant criminal syndicate, which ruthlessly exploits the Legionnaires for all that they're worth through dues and other mandatory purchases. This rank exploitation is also seen at the local level in the person of Osgood, the commander of Taylor's Legion outfit who shamelessly uses his men to drive out his pharmacist competitors in a montage of terrorist violence. This conceptualization of American fascists as gangsters was also utilized as a substitution for the inability of the studio to adapt the original treatment that openly condemned the group for its anti-

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<sup>114</sup> Birdwell, 54.

<sup>115</sup> Birdwell, 52. In contrast to the collapse of Taylor's household, his formerly alcoholic friend Ed Grogan, who rejects the idea of joining the Black Legion, makes a happy marriage for himself, before Taylor murders him. (Ibid 49).

Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Communism.<sup>116</sup>

The Black Legion was a real secret society derived from the 1920s-era Ku Klux Klan and centered in the industrial Midwest. During its heyday from 1932 until 1935, the Legion primarily consisted of seasonal migrant workers from the Upper South, and at first also served as a clearing-house for tips about possible jobs.<sup>117</sup> It was not long after the Legion's founding that the organization began to display a proclivity towards terrorism and violence directed against African-Americans, Jews, and labor organizers. It was the Legion's 1936 ritual murder of Works Progress Administration employee Charles Poole that led to the group's demise, and ultimately the FBI indicted the murderers and exposed the Legion's infiltration of several municipal and county governments in Michigan.<sup>118</sup> Although the Warner Bros. production explores the xenophobia and terrorist violence of the organization, the final scenario did not openly comment on the group's anti-black racism, anti-Semitism, and fanatical hatred of organized labor. The original screen proposal from Warner Bros. producer Robert Lord closely followed the Black Legion's actual modus operandi. The story would center on a factory worker who is driven into the waiting arms of the group when a Jewish worker is promoted to foreman over himself. The Production Code Administration, in a tactic often used to prevent the production of these sorts of message films, objected to this facet of the story on the grounds that it would possibly stir up religious prejudice. In the final draft of the script, the Jewish worker became Polish-American Joe Dumbrowski, and the

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<sup>116</sup> Birdwell, 49.

<sup>117</sup> David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1965 [1981 ed.]), 308-309.

<sup>118</sup> Roffman and Purdy, 175.

Legion itself was portrayed as a primarily anti-immigrant organization, rather than openly anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-union, and anti-black.<sup>119</sup> The final script also turns the premeditated ritual murder of Charles Poole into an accidental killing committed in panic on the part of Taylor against his best friend Ed Grogan, after Grogan discovers thanks to Taylor's drunkenness the night before that his friend is behind the spate of terror attacks against immigrants in their community.<sup>120</sup> The film also discounts the fact that the real-life Black Legion managed to infiltrate many local governments throughout the Midwest during its heyday. Instead, the film adheres to the provisions of the Production Code that precluded portraying such a dim view of government or law enforcement agencies: an individual might be corrupt, but not an institution. *Black Legion* assures its audiences by having the judge presiding over Taylor's trial (and ultimately the trial of his confederates) that the Legion is anti-American because its methods of vigilante violence and anti-immigrant terrorism are beyond the pale of Constitutional government. Through keeping with the PCA's provision that the institutions of the American government had to be consistently portrayed as above corruption or susceptibility to radical, anti-American ideals, *Black Legion* uses the denouement to separate the members of the group from the norms of the community. These unmanly, violent gangsters allowed themselves to be manipulated by way of their own failures, but an incorruptible judicial system, along with the natural umbrage of the upstanding members of the community, ensures that the normal boundaries of an American town remain protected under the rule of law and order.

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<sup>119</sup> Birdwell, 48-49.

<sup>120</sup> Birdwell, 48-49.

### III

#### SPAIN ONSCREEN: *BLOCKADE* AND ITS WORLD

The production and 1938 release of *Blockade* coincided with disinherit news from the front lines of the Spanish Civil War from the points of view of those who supported the government of the Spanish Republic. At the time of the film's premier, the forces loyal to the Madrid Popular Front government were reeling both from military defeats at the hands of Franco's Nationalist forces while simultaneously being fatally weakened by internal divisions inspired by the Soviet-directed assault against anti-Franco militias outside of the approved ideological boundaries set by Stalin's regime. The Spanish Civil War itself inspired impassioned opinions far beyond the battleground of Spain itself. Throughout Western Europe and the United States, pro-Republican activists, motivated in no small part by the footage appearing week after week in theater newsreels showing and alluding to the carnage unleashed by the Nationalists and their German and Italian allies, held fundraisers (often revolving around the screening of pro-Republican documentaries)<sup>121</sup>, agitated for an end to the arms embargo imposed by the United States against both warring parties (but in fact benefiting Franco), and even left directly to confront the forces of international fascism themselves.

Given the ideological conflict at the heart of this war, as well as the immediacy of the violence and suffering that modern newsreel teams brought home for their audiences, it seemed that the conflict in Spain was a natural topic for a feature film. However, the

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<sup>121</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 112-117.

very aspects of the war that suggested its suitability as a dramatic film subject made an actual production of the topic anathema within from the point of view of the major studios and Hollywood's censorship system. Production Code Administration head Joseph Breen in particular argued against attempts to bring this great ideological war to the big screen on the ground that such a feature film would inspire a boycott of Hollywood's products throughout Latin America and Europe, while arousing the fury of anti-movie activists from the ranks of both the political right and the Catholic Church. The eruption of the Spanish Civil War occurred in 1936, only two years into the existence of the Breen Office and only several more years removed from the campaigns launched early in the decade by both Catholic clergy and laymen activists to force the major studios to conform to the Production Code, a set of regulations that precluded the release of films that "unfairly" portrayed foreign nations, religious authorities, or world leaders. Even as the political left rallied in support of the beleaguered Republican government, Francisco Franco, in presenting himself as a defender of Catholicism in Spain from the secular and often violently anti-Church Madrid government, enjoyed staunch support from the Catholic Church and Church-affiliated organizations—most notably the Legion of Decency.<sup>122</sup>

*Blockade* primarily drew upon the talents of three individuals active in Hollywood Popular Front organizations: screenwriter John Howard Lawson, the doyen of the small Communist Party in Hollywood, director William Dieterle, fresh off his Warner Bros. triumph of *The Life of Emile Zola*, and independent producer Walter Wanger, who

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<sup>122</sup>Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 134-135.

released the film through United Artists. Wanger's political alignments during the 1930s exemplified the strange alliances and positions that could emerge from someone supportive of Popular Front organizations while rising through the ranks of the studio system. Although Wanger was sincere in his support groups such as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, and was a staunch internationalist in an era of entrenched American isolationism, he had been just as sincere in his attempts earlier in the 1930s to forge a business alliance with Mussolini's regime in Italy, centered on the *Duce's* plans to create an Italian rival to Hollywood in the form of the mammoth *Cinecitta*.<sup>123</sup> The project that eventually emerged as *Blockade* had been initiated by *All Quiet on the Western Front* director Lewis Milestone, who brought the idea to Wanger of adapting the Illya Ehrenberg novel *The Love of Jeanne Ney* into an updated film set in the Spanish Civil War. Playwright Clifford Odets, the author of the 1935 Popular Front play *Waiting for Lefty* was asked to write the script by Wanger in collaboration with Milestone. After he and Milestone left the project, John Howard Lawson was brought in to complete the script.<sup>124</sup>

John Howard Lawson's finished screenplay embodied major Popular Front ideas and imagery concerning the portrayal of ordinary people struggling against unjust forces. *Blockade* opens in a bucolic Spanish valley, tended to by happy shepherds and prosperous farmers in the shadow of the fictional city and port of Castamare. Marco (Henry Fonda) is a Spanish peasant who happily tends his land while dreaming of a better future for himself and his people. The peace is permanently shattered when an invading

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<sup>123</sup> Doherty, 125.

<sup>124</sup> Greg M. Smith, "'Blockade': Partisan Protest, Popular Debate, and Encapsulated Texts," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Autumn, 1996) 22.

army, preceded by thunderclap-like artillery explosions, enters the valley. The farmers, rallied by Marco, prevent the army from passing and the landowner becomes an officer in the army opposing the invaders. Marco's forces are tasked with preventing the still unnamed but obviously merciless enemy forces from closing off Castamare from the outside world. The army defending the valley and the port, facing annihilation from the outside, is systematically undermined from within the besieged city by fifth columnists who enable to blockade to continue its vice-like grip on the port, leading to starvation among the civilians already suffering artillery and air bombardment. The spies report on the scheduled deliveries from relief ships, which are then cruelly sunk by submarines within sight of land. The crux of the film comes as it is revealed that Marco's senior commander is in fact the spy who the enemy has used to uncover the schedules of the ships bringing food and medical supplies to Castamare.<sup>125</sup>

The film's implicit identification of the Nationalist and by extension fascist cause with ruthless subterfuge was part of a wider trend during the late 1930s in which authors and filmmakers sympathetic to the left drew upon the espionage genre for settings that would offer friendly portraits of the wider antifascist cause. Michael Denning argues that this genre was agreeable to artists sympathetic with the political left due to the possibility of creating antifascist protagonists that could espouse Popular Front ideals for an international movement and an international moment. The cloak-and-dagger world of these settings further reinforced the imagery of fascists as little better than gangsters. After *Blockade* and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (the latter film being able to clearly identify which nation the spy antagonists of its story represented) this form of

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<sup>125</sup> *Blockade*. DVD. Directed by William Dieterle, 1938. Image Entertainment, 2002.

identification of Popular Front heroes with the international antifascist cause carried over naturally into World War II Hollywood message films, most notably such productions as *Across the Pacific* (1942), *Casablanca* (1942), *Watch on the Rhine* (1943), and *Hangmen Also Die* (1943).<sup>126</sup>

*Blockade* further condemned fascist aggression and brutality by appropriating conservative and traditional Spanish institutions and symbolism in the service of the pro-Republican left. Although the two opposing forces are never openly identified as either Republican or Nationalist (the uniforms were deliberately designed to make any identification of these two sides an impossibility<sup>127</sup>) most contemporary critics had little trouble discerning that the film sympathized with the Republic. James Dugan, reviewing *Blockade* for *The New Masses*, praised the film for explicitly showing what other forms of American mass media had until then been all-too reluctant to show their audiences, writing,

The picture is, of course, without the direct references to the Spanish situation that would make it complete and unmistakably clear. What it does most magnificently is tell the universal story of innocent people victimized by the fascist war machine. There are many shots of lowly Catholics, praying for food; scenes of soldiers storing works of art underground, away from the air raiders. The details, the faces of suffering people, children begging pennies in cafes—the misery upon which fascism's triumphal arch rests—are here for each to see. This is what the American people have not been told on the radio and in the press; something that has waited for the film to tell.<sup>128</sup>

The film effectively presents its protagonists as ordinary people tied to the land, defending their families and friends from unseen, relentless aggressors. *Blockade*

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<sup>126</sup> Denning, 377-378.

<sup>127</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 307.

<sup>128</sup> James Dugan, "Movies," in *The New Masses*, June 28, 1938, accessed May 11, 2015 from <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewMasses-1938jun28-00027>

dramatizes the plight of the besieged population of Castamare by highlighting their desperate prayers for salvation, which finally arrives in the form of a delivery ship that successfully delivers its supplies thanks to a diversion planned by Marco. Matthew Bernstein notes in his biography of Wanger that this was a gross inversion of reality given how the majority of Spain's landowners sided with Franco's forces during the war, as well as the fact that most of the violence inflicted on the Catholic Church in the course of the conflict was done so by pro-Republican forces.<sup>129</sup>

Historians who have written about and analyzed *Blockade* generally emphasize that the film was a disappointment at the box office both because of its outward ideological confusion and the hostility that the production elicited across the United States and overseas. *Blockade* suffered both from boycott campaigns launched by moralist organizations such as the Catholic Legion of Decency and the Knights of Columbus and from the decision by several first run theater chains not to show the movie. The film was also subjected to national bans throughout Europe and Latin America that proved deleterious for an A picture.<sup>130</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of the film's conscious distortion of the ideological dispute inherent in the conflict and its failures to openly identify the Nationalists as its antagonists, *Blockade* did manage to effectively convey the horrors of a post-First World War mechanized conflict in which a ruthless enemy army primarily targeted civilians. It's the plight of the civilians targeted deliberately by enemy forces both via bombardment and blockade that leaves the greatest impression on viewers. Unlike the antiwar films from earlier in the decade (such as *The Dawn Patrol*

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<sup>129</sup> Bernstein, 132.

<sup>130</sup> Koppes and Black, 25, Smith, 20.

[1930] and *All Quiet on the Western Front* [1931]), the horrors of war were accompanied by the message showing that it was desirable to defend one's home against aggression, which would become a staple of pro-interventionist message films in the early 1940s.

The film also constructs the antifascist war as a defense of an innocent land against the forces of mechanization, which in international left wing discourse was often viewed as a manifestation of a capitalist system being held up through fascist oppression.<sup>131</sup> The centrality placed by Wanger, Dieterle, and Lawson on the plight of the people even subsumes its romantic subplot between Marco and a journalist-turned spy played by Madeline Carol. Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, in their study of classical Hollywood's social problem films, note that Carol's character comes over to the side of the defenders of Castamare due to her horror of what has been inflicted on the city's civilians by the blockade and bombardment rather than her love for Marco.<sup>132</sup> *Blockade* concludes with a condemnation of the world's manifest inaction at the plight of the civilians victimized by the fighting—implicitly this cry to the outside world is a condemnation of the Nationalists and their German and Italian allies. Marco refuses an offer by his commander to seek time away from the frontlines to find peace after the breaking of the blockade and the exposure of the city's fifth column. Instead, Marco breaks the fourth wall by directly imploring the audience,

Peace? Where can you find peace? The whole country's a battleground. There is no peace. There is no safety for women and children. Schools and hospitals are targets. And this isn't war, not war between soldiers. It's not war, it's murder. It makes no sense. The world *can* stop it. Where is the conscience of the world?<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Roffman and Purdy, 206.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Roffman and Purdy, 207.

#### IV

### THE POPULAR FRONT AND NATIONAL SECURITY: *CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY* AND ITS WORLD

The first Hollywood film produced at a major studio to openly denounce Nazi Germany was an espionage thriller released in 1939 by Warner Bros. Directed by Anatole Litvak and filmed off the screenplay co-written by John Wexley and Milton Krimm, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, like many of Warner Bros.' memorable films from the 1930s, was borrowed from true events. The film was inspired by an espionage case in New York City stemming from the FBI's successful break-up of a cell of German agents who had attempted the theft of classified military information. The Bureau agent in charge of the case, Leon G. Turrou, gained national fame with the release of his memoirs of the investigation during the trial, the rights of which were acquired by Warner Bros.<sup>134</sup> Although Joseph Breen expressed reservations to a project that openly condemned the activities of a foreign government, he ultimately approved the final script over the objections of other censors in the PCA office. The seal of approval from Breen was an acknowledgement that on the part of the film industry censors that film could offer commentary on controversial international events, provided that they fairly represented the information onscreen and dealt accurately with ongoing controversies. With the prohibitive restrictions now being placed on the output of the major studios by both Berlin and Rome, and the growing visibility of the Nazis' anti-Semitic violence and

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<sup>134</sup> Giovacchini, 94.

military aggression, there was far less hesitation on the part of studio management in portraying the Nazis as “heavies” than had existed only a few years before.

For the executives at Warner Bros., *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* served several important purposes. Like *Juarez*, released the same year, this production would showcase the studio’s alignment with the national security policies of the Roosevelt Administration, anticipating a more proactive anti-Nazi foreign policy on the part of the White House. If *Juarez* served as a reminder that the United States stood behind the nations of Latin America against European tyranny and military aggression, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* would reinforce the contrast between a healthy civic-minded Americanism with fascist maliciousness and un-Americanism. The openly anti-Nazi imagery of this production was brought to the surface through the confluence between the studio’s support of the Federal government with the personal beliefs of its director, screenwriters, and a significant portion of its cast.

#### Newsreel politics

*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* assured its viewers that the production was a truthful account of the dangers that the Third Reich posed to the United States. Thomas Doherty notes that film is an uneasy combination of an espionage thriller and a newsreel.<sup>135</sup> It’s the quasi-documentary format that enhances the topicality and authenticity of the film, assuring its audience that what they are watching on the screen reflects a true story that has been vetted by a free press and is now preserved for future generations. Otis

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<sup>135</sup> Doherty, 339.

Ferguson, in a review written for *The New Republic*, commented,

They [the filmmakers] are smooth as silk about it, starting off without credit titles of any kind, on the words of a “news” commentator who leads directly into the action in March of Time fashion. The illusion is freshened from time to time by reversion to comment plus rapidly intercut news shots and animated maps. But instead of the brief, self-conscious “enactments” of the news-film type, characters here build with the story, understood and projected with the natural truth of good theater illusion...<sup>136</sup>

The illusion described by Ferguson is sustained in large part due to radio actor John Deering, who mimics the voice of a newsreel announcer throughout *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.<sup>137</sup> The film chronicles the attempts by the Third Reich to purloin military secrets from classified blueprints regarding the strength of American military divisions, utilizing willing (though ultimately incompetent) volunteers from a pro-Nazi organization clearly modeled on Fritz Kuhn’s German-American Bund. The cinematic Bund’s miniature Fuhrer Dr. Kassel (Paul Lukas) claims that supporting National Socialism is indistinguishable from being a genuine American patriot, stating that he is simultaneously a loyal American and loyal to his German fatherland. This rhetoric of Nazified Americanism is belied by the thuggish behavior of the Bundists at one of their rallies, who physically assault both a German-American spectator and several members of the American Legion who object to Kassel’s extolling of Adolf Hitler and of Nazi ideology.

The American Legion serves as a standard of patriotism against the domestic Nazi movement in the film, reinforcing a message that try as they might to sway the public with their vitriolic rhetoric and their attempts to co-opt Americanism in the name of their leader, the very foreign nature of their ideology will doom them to failure. The presence

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<sup>136</sup> “They’re Down! They’re Up!” in *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson*. Ed. by Robert Wilson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1971), 253.

<sup>137</sup> Doherty, 339.

of the Legionnaires in this film underscored the friendly relationship that the Warner Bros. executives cultivated with the organization at the end of the 1930s.<sup>138</sup> The Legionnaires also reinforces a contrast between true Americans and the Nazi-inspired German-American movement that has refused to assimilate to the values and norms of their adopted nation. Continuing an important theme from *Black Legion*, American fascists are portrayed outside of the accepted norms of masculinity. Kassel is a philanderer, the wannabe spy (and German immigrant) Kurt Schneider (Francis Lederer) is an unemployed loafer who refuses to support his family under the spell of his own delusions of grandeur, while Schneider's apolitical German-American army buddy (Joe Sawyer) whom he ropes into stealing classified defense plans is shown to be dramatically out of his depth. The un-American nature of the Bund is highlighted by choices in setting. Drawing upon first-hand research conducted by co-writer Milson Krimm, the members of the Bund are shown in shadowy dives and eateries modeled on pro-Nazi restaurants in Manhattan's Yorkville district. The conclusion of the film occurs at a well-lit café where Agent Renard and the District Attorney gauge the reaction of members of the public to the recent trial of the Nazi spies. They are heartened to overhear that the patrons firmly reject the poisonous ideas that the Bund (and by extension the Third Reich itself) have attempted to inject into the American body politic via insidious propaganda.<sup>139</sup>

Dr. Kassel is the head of a network of national spies that draws upon the services of German-Americans supportive of the Third Reich, who are expected to receive and pass on information to Germany via another pro-Nazi contact in Scotland. This wave of

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<sup>138</sup> Doherty, 331-335.

<sup>139</sup> Giovacchini, 104-105.

anti-American espionage becomes a deluge during the course of the film at the instigation of Reich propaganda minister Josef Goebbels (Martin Koesleck), who orders the Bund to begin a campaign in the United States that will stir up religious and national hatred, chillingly illustrated with a montage narrated by John Deerling of German-printed and inspired fliers being scattered like ticker-tape across cities, dropped into mailboxes, and even into a child's lunch box. This is the closest that the film comes to acknowledging the Nazis' anti-Semitism.<sup>140</sup> The Gestapo dispatches its own enforcers to New York led by the ominous Schlager (George Sanders), to oversee the theft of American defense plans. Schlager runs the operations of the ambitious yet woefully incompetent Schneider. Schneider's weaknesses as a man and cluelessness as a spy are set against a ruthlessly competent representative of American law enforcement.

Robinson's G-Man Ed Renard is initially virtually alone in his belief that the United States is woefully unprepared for a wave of foreign infiltration and terrorism, and serves as the production's voice for supporting a stronger national defense. A stand in for real-life FBI agent Leon Turrou, Renard combats the spy ring with great finesse and confidence and assisted by Schneider's pitiful amateurism, which ends in the Bundist's arrest. During his interrogation of the would-be spy, Renard goads Schneider into making a full confession by stoking the wretched man's ego, encouraging the suspect to detail his full involvement in the Gestapo's espionage campaign. Having broken the case, Renard and his agents methodically round up the nest of Gestapo spies. For all of his trouble, Dr. Kassel is kidnapped by the Gestapo and unceremoniously shipped back to Germany to

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<sup>140</sup> Doherty, 341. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Television broadcast. Directed by Anatole Litvak, 1939.

answer for his role in enabling the FBI's successful dragnet against their New York base of operations. Schneider and his co-conspirators stand trial for their crimes, where they are subjected to a harangue by the presiding judge, echoing the finale of *Black Legion*, for being in thrall to a foreign, anti-American, and anti-democratic movement. The film concludes optimistically, as Renard and another agent reflect on the case in a New York café, marveling at the unwarranted aggression of the Third Reich against the United States, the other patrons discuss the news of the German espionage ring by condemning anyone who could be so foolish as to offer their services to such as a movement. Once again, the American people and their institutions have been shown to be above the corruption of nefarious regimes and ideologies.

Renard's fight against the Nazi agents showcased a trend in American cinema that on the one hand discouraged the portrayal of gangster violence onscreen, made infamous in the early 1930s cycle of Warner Bros. films that had made stars of Robinson in *Little Caesar*, James Cagney in *The Public Enemy*, and Paul Muni in *Scarface* but on the other hand legitimized similar violent actions when they were committed by law enforcement agents against the enemies of public order and decency. In this context, Robinson's portrayal of FBI agent Renard can be seen as a continuation of the kind of roles played by Cagney in *G-Men* (1935) and by Robinson himself in *Bullets or Ballots* (1937). This sympathetic portrayal of gangster violence when applied against the enemies of the United States would become an important part in the development of an acceptable masculine template for male protagonists in American World War II cinema, most visibly expressed by actors such as Humphrey Bogart and Alan Ladd in early wartime films such

as *All Through the Night* (1942), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and *Casablanca* (1942).<sup>141</sup>

As Eric Sandeen notes, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* is notable for allowing the true ringleaders of the espionage campaign to escape back to the Reich, thus highlighting the culpability of the German government in what in earlier portrayals might have been shown as primarily a gangster organization, such as in *Black Legion*.<sup>142</sup>

*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* generally drew praise from critics for its willingness to frankly identify the Nazis as clear dangers to the United States and it was celebrated in left wing and radical circles as an example, as in the case of Dieterle's recent biopics, of a politically conscious cinema unafraid of frankly addressing the world's contemporary crises and problems. It also showcased the growing presence of the European refugee community in Hollywood, several of whom filled key roles in the production.<sup>143</sup> More clearly than the portrayal of fascism in social problem films in the proceeding few years, the Nazi menace was clearly shown to be outside of the borders of the (now national) community. Although plans to use actual footage of Hitler were scrapped by the producers,<sup>144</sup> the presence of Goebbels (and the accompanying swastika-embroidered German and German-American regalia) reinforced the foreign nature of fascism to the American public. However, the production did not lead to a hoped-for wave of anti-Nazi releases. The film was subjected to national bans throughout Europe and Latin America, limiting its revenue at the box office. Although most studios adopted a wait-and-see

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<sup>141</sup> McLaughlin and Parry, 220-221.

<sup>142</sup> Eric J. Sandeen, "Anti-Nazi Sentiment in Film: *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and the German-American Bund" in *American Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1979), 75.

<sup>143</sup> Anticipating a common usage of anti-Nazi (often Jewish) German-speaking refugee actors in Hollywood wartime cinema, two of the primary antagonists in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Dr. Kassel and Kurt Schneider) are both played by émigré Jewish actors.

<sup>144</sup> Giovacchini, 98.

approach to similar projects, it was no longer possible on the part of the Breen Office to argue, in the light escalating anti-Jewish violence and foreign aggression, that a negative portrayal of the people and institutions of the Third Reich was unfair or inaccurate.

## V

### THE MORALITY OF ANTIFASCISM: *THE GREAT DICTATOR*

He [Chaplin] is a heroic figure, but heroic only in the patience and resource with which he receives the blows that fall upon his bowler. In his actions and loves he emulates the angels. But in Herr Hitler the angel has become a devil. The soleless boots have become *Reitstieffeln*; the shapeless trousers, riding breeches; the cane, a riding crop; the bowler, a forage cap. The Tramp has become a storm trooper; only the moustache is the same.

-an unsigned article in the *Spectator*, April 21, 1939<sup>145</sup>

I. Hynkel moves hypnotically toward the globe (one hand on hip—one outstretched). He lifts it from its stand. There is a moment of magical concentration. The globe becomes a balloon. Hynkel bounces it from wrist to wrist and off the top of his head. He finds he can do what he likes with it. The world is his oyster. He laughs ecstatically as he plays with it nonchalance...

...X. He catches it roughly (anger business). Laughs demoniacally. The globe pops. He picks up the skin forlornly and bursts into tears.

-The beginning and the end of Adenoid Hynkel's (Charles Chaplin's) ten-stage dance with a balloon globe, from *The Great Dictator* (1940).<sup>146</sup>

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if they let us live and be happy again?"<sup>147</sup>

-Hannah (Paulette Goddard) to the Jewish Barber (Charles Chaplin), in *The Great*

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in David Robinson, *Chaplin: His Life and Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 484-485.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in *Ibid*, 500.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Welky, 230.

## *Dictator* (1940)

### The dictator's final speech

The segment of Charles Chaplin's 1940 film *The Great Dictator* that arguably attracted the most critical attention upon its release was its ending, which consisted of Chaplin directly addressing the camera for an approximately four minute long speech. Most of the film's comedy prior to this finale plays upon the physical similarities between the hapless Jewish Barber and the titular dictator Adenoid Hynkel of Tomania (both played by Chaplin). At the film's conclusion the Barber along with his anti-regime friend and fellow First World War combat veteran Schultz (Reginald Gardner) have escaped from a concentration camp and trek towards the frontier separating Tomania from Osterlitz, which has been recently conquered by the forces of the expansionist Tomanian Reich under the direct orders of Hynkel himself. But the Tomanian dictator is unable to enjoy the fruits of his lightning campaign. While out in the country to give himself plausible deniability regarding the invasion, Hynkel is arrested by Double Cross storm troopers who mistake their leader for the recently escaped Barber. In turn, the Barber, disguised in a military uniform, is mistaken for Hynkel, and is escorted across the former frontier by an honor guard.

Interior Minister Garbitch (Henry Daniell), portrayed throughout the film both as the power behind Hynkel's throne and as the regime's chief ideologue, presages his master's arrival in the former capital of Osterlitz with an address of his own. Garbitch coldly announces to the assembled Tomanian soldiers and to the world that with this new victory, the Double Cross Party under its absolute ruler Hynkel have abolished the very

concept of democracy. In its place, there will be a new world where those deemed “Aryan” will rule over all others based on the concepts of racial superiority and the absolute rule by one man. Now led to the platform after Garbitch, the Barber is urged by Schultz to speak. At this moment, Chaplin breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience. His disguise, both as the character of the Jewish Barber and as an actor in his own film, dramatically falls away to reveal a man of profound and heart-felt political convictions:

I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone— if possible –Jew, Gentile—black man—white. We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness—not by each other’s misery. We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone.

The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way. Greed has poisoned men’s souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost...<sup>148</sup>

The speech links this bleak economic world with the cruelty foisted upon civilization by the fascist dictatorships. Chaplin urges those assembled before him—both the ordinary soldiers in the film and his prospective audience—to refuse the orders of these “machine men” with their “machine hearts” and “machine minds.” This stinging denunciation of fascism attempts to imagine an alternative to the lies, terrorism, and inhumanity of the

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<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964 [2003 ed.]), 393-394.

dictators based on a universal rediscovery of the best in humanity, an alternative that will lead to a world where political freedom will go hand in hand with an economy where no one will suffer from inequality or want.

*The Great Dictator* proved to be a great financial and critical success for Chaplin, earning over \$5 million at the international box office.<sup>149</sup> Its popular success indicated how far the national American mood in regards to the European fascist dictatorships had shifted over the previous few years. The film was released as other studios began to put projects into production supportive both of the British war against the Axis and a proactive, anti-German national defense. However, many observers were unsure of what to make of the final speech, in large part because on the surface the heartfelt address seemed to contradict many of the film's preceding themes. If the European fascist dictatorships were so pernicious, unscrupulous, inhuman, and violent in their everyday governance and diplomacy with other nations, wasn't it naïve to imagine their foot soldiers, much less their civilian subjects, would turn against their rulers upon a simple plea for a common humanity? In certain respects the ending was unnerving for its complete merger of the Jewish Barber's hapless nativity in the personage of Adenoid Hynkel the dictator.<sup>150</sup> Bosley Crowther, writing in the *New York Times*, captured this general critical reaction to the final speech, noting,

On the debit side, the picture is overlong, it is inclined to be repetitious and the speech with which it ended -- the appeal for reason and kindness -- is completely out of joint with that which has gone before. In it Chaplin steps out of character

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<sup>149</sup> Welky, 233.

<sup>150</sup> Roffman and Purdy, 217-218.

and addresses his heart to the audience. The effect is bewildering, and what should be the climax becomes flat and seemingly maudlin.<sup>151</sup>

These critical voices regarding the final speech tended to remove Chaplin's address from one of the central themes of the film, namely the link between the fascist dictatorships and economic desperation, absurdity, and injustice that had now come to afflict their subjects. Filmed in a lengthy production during the heyday of the Popular Front in Hollywood, these criticisms did not take into account how Chaplin had constructed an antifascist message film that attempted to link economic and social calamity with the inhumanity of the contemporary European dictatorships.

#### Chaplin and message films

*The Great Dictator* was the second film directed by Chaplin that attempted to directly address and put an absurdist spin on the world's hardships and injustices. His previous film and last outing as the famed Tramp *Modern Times* (1936) had been largely been inspired by a round-the-world tour that he had taken during the worst years of the Great Depression. During this trip he had also met with many politicians and intellectuals to discuss the problems of the day. That film had commented on the era's rampant unemployment, violent labor unrest, and overall desperation for a modicum of social security through a lens critical of the role that machinery and the desire to use that machinery to maximize the labor performed by human beings, with the Tramp literally

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151 Bosley Crowther, "The Great Dictator," in *The New York Times*, October 16, 1940, accessed March 19, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/30/reviews/chaplin-premiere.html>.

consumed by his own Taylorist assembly line when he suffers a nervous breakdown from the constant speed-ups in production ordered by the tyrannical factory boss via telescreen. *Modern Times* was Chaplin's first foray into making an openly political message film, and it would prove to be the first in an informally linked trilogy critical of contemporary inequalities and social violence, followed by *The Great Dictator* in 1940 and the far more pessimistic *Monsieur Verdoux* in 1947.

Charges of Communist affiliation dogged Chaplin throughout his career, most notoriously during the postwar HUAC investigations that would culminate in his effective banishment from the United States. They persisted even as the actor attempted to publically appear aloof on the question of formally joining any particular party or organization. Chaplin did participate in wartime drives to support the Allied cause through speeches, and was particularly vocal about the need for the Western Allies to open a second front in support of the Soviet Union.<sup>152</sup> In spite of this apparent disassociation from contemporary politics, Chaplin was well aware of the events and individuals shaping the wider world around him and increasingly leading the world towards the abyss of a second major conflagration. After the production of *Modern Times*, during which time he began to finalize plans to produce a satire on Adolf Hitler, Chaplin became acquainted with politically active radicals in coastal California, several of whom came to work under him at Chaplin Studios for the duration of the project.<sup>153</sup> The production was lengthy and tightly controlled by Chaplin, with many of the film's most memorable and seemingly abstract moments exhaustively rehearsed. David

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<sup>152</sup> Robinson, 515-517.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 492-494.

Robinson notes that this was partially due to the constraints placed on the director and his actors by the need to adhere to written dialogue.<sup>154</sup> Robinson also observes that due to the lengthy breaks between Chaplin's productions, the director consistently found himself having to catch up with the newest filmmaking techniques. The shooting script for the film eventually ran to over three hundred pages, and the final print ran to 11,600 feet of film.<sup>155</sup>

### The Dictator and "The People"

One of the themes of *The Great Dictator* that carries over from *Modern Times* is the association of mechanization and modern industry with personal oppression and societal violence. Chaplin dramatically expanded on this theme by now juxtaposing modern machines and the attitudes that create and run them with war and the brutality of the European dictatorships. Yet if the cold machinery of war and government oppression is a fact in these contemporary times, so is the fallibility of these worst aspects of mankind. In Chaplin's vision, these failures are inevitable when the "machine men" of the Barber's final address encounter anything spontaneous. This is highlighted in two of the film's back-to-back sequences directly comparing Adenoid Hynkel and the Jewish Barber through the use of classical music. Hynkel, sitting in his office and surrounded by Interior Minister Garbitch and Field Marshal Herring, has his head filled with Garbitch's glorious vision of the entire world under his total control and purged of both Jews and

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<sup>154</sup> Robinson, 489-490.

<sup>155</sup> Welky, 229.

brunettes. Ordering Garbitch and Herring to leave, the dictator of Tomania performs an elaborate dance to the strains of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin* with a large balloon globe of the world. The dance, tightly choreographed and exhaustively rehearsed by Chaplin in ten parts,<sup>156</sup> is brought to a sudden end when it pops in his face. This scene is immediately followed by the Barber perfectly shaving a customer in his shop to the strains of Brahms's *Hungarian Dance # 5*. The identification of Hynkel's dictatorship with that of machines is also used to portray his government as incompetent and out of touch. Field Marshall Herring delights in bringing before Hynkel scientists to demonstrate their newest military inventions, including a bulletproof uniform and a parachute that opens via the head that both prove fatally inadequate for their inventors during the demonstrations. Hynkel's solution to news of three thousand striking factory workers angry over their low wages is similarly callous: he orders the execution of all involved, in the name of keeping his workers happy.<sup>157</sup>

The Jews of the Ghetto serve as the film's personification of the effect that fascist anti-Semitism and violence has had on the population as a whole. Eric Flom notes that *The Great Dictator* uses the plight of the Jews to show how fascism is fundamentally anti-people.<sup>158</sup> Compared to a regime comprised almost entirely of young to middle aged uniformed officials,<sup>159</sup> almost all of the Jewish characters are portrayed by older actors, several of whom were drawn from Hollywood's large émigré community.<sup>160</sup> By the

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<sup>156</sup> Robinson, 499-501.

<sup>157</sup> Roffman and Purdy, 217.

<sup>158</sup> Eric Flom, *Chaplin in the Sound Era: An Analysis of Seven Talkies* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2008) 138.

<sup>159</sup> Commander Schultz, the non-Jewish Tomanian who garners audience sympathy throughout the film gradually loses his uniform as he falls out of favor with the regime.

<sup>160</sup> Flom, 137-138.

beginning of *The Great Dictator*, the Jews of Tomania have been driven out of their society, forced to scratch a living under the terror of violent assault from bands of storm troopers, and reduced to traditional Jewish occupations such as peddling. There is a degree of cynicism to Hynkel's anti-Semitism, which is clearly shown while the dictator attempts to secure a loan for the invasion of neighboring Osterlitz from a Jewish banker, which forces the dictator to temporarily reverse his anti-Jewish policies. Hynkel's anti-Semitic rhetoric is also used to deconstruct the role played by the modern media in the age of the European dictatorships: in his address to the Sons and Daughters of the Double Cross—a mixture of German-sounding gibberish and animal snarling<sup>161</sup>—the already violent speech (to the point where even the microphones reel backwards from him in terror) takes on a new air of undisguised menace when the dictator begins to talk about the “Juden.” The hate-filled rant is cheerfully translated as “His Excellency has just referred to the Jewish people,” from the pre-released transcript for Tomania's English-language news broadcaster.

#### The limitations of “reality.”

The critical and financial success of *The Great Dictator* marked the acceptance that anti-Nazi feature films now enjoyed in the United States. *The Great Dictator* was a production that exemplified the form that Hollywood's antifascist alliance had assumed in 1940, even with the splintering the Popular Front: an alliance between left-wing

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<sup>161</sup> This was a dialogue technique that Chaplin used in his final two films as the Tramp, in *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936).

filmmakers and antifascist European émigrés in a studio system more receptive to topical, realist forms of film production than ever before. If *The Great Dictator* also anticipated the high point of politically aware antifascist feature films that would be produced in Hollywood from 1941 until 1945, it also anticipated the limits of what even the most committed realist, antifascist paradigm could capture in the early 1940s in regard to Nazi brutality and violence. Chaplin himself would acknowledge in his autobiography decades later that had he known of what the Nazis were actually doing to the Jews of Europe, he would have been unable to make *The Great Dictator*.<sup>162</sup> The war years would further challenge the studio system's filmmaking norms in a manner that would reflect changing audience tastes and the harsh realities created by the new international struggle against the Axis powers for a better world. This new reality would challenge the conventions promoted by the industry's systems and norms of censorship. Filmmakers affiliated with the Hollywood Popular Front, from its 1930s inception until its late 1940s denouement, would play important roles in shifting the limitations placed upon antifascist message films during the next decade, even as the local and national political establishment began to find their very presence in the halls of film production undesirable.

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<sup>162</sup> Chaplin, 387-388.

# LEGACIES

# I

## CASABLANCA TO KEY LARGO:

### LEFT ANTIFASCISM IN WARTIME AND POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD

“This time I know our side will win.”

-Victor Lazlo (Paul Henreid) to Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) as he prepares to depart for America at the conclusion of *Casablanca* (1942)<sup>163</sup>

“Wars, conflict—it’s all business. One murder makes a villain; millions, a hero. Numbers sanctify my good fellow!”...”As for being a mass killer, does not the world encourage it? Is it not building weapons of destruction for the sole purpose of mass killing? Has it not blown unsuspecting women and little children to pieces? And done it very scientifically? As a mass killer, I am an amateur by comparison...”

-Verdoux (Charles Chaplin), on trial for murder in *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947)<sup>164</sup>

The wartime Popular Front and the politics of film production, 1942-1948

When the audience is first introduced to Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) in Warner Bros.’ *Casablanca* (1942), the American expatriate appears to be a man aloof from the life-or-death concerns of the international crowd of refugees, Resistance fighters, and underworld denizens who frequent his cantina. Blaine’s outwardly hostile neutrality regarding the ongoing war and the heavy hand of Nazi domination felt even in Vichy-controlled Morocco begins to slip away under questioning from one of the film’s

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<sup>163</sup> Quoted in Roffman and Purdy, 220.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Richard Lingeman, *The Noir Forties: The American People from Victory to Cold War* (New York: Nation Books, 2012), 236.

less than savory characters, the amoral Vichy-aligned police captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains). Nothing that Blaine ran guns to the Ethiopians in 1935 and then fought for the Loyalists in Spain—victories for the European dictatorships that were bitter pills for any staunch antifascist—he dismisses Blaine’s financial motivations for both ventures when “the winning side would have paid better.”<sup>165</sup> The cantina itself lends credence to the pointed questions of Renault as to where his true allegiance is. Lary May observes,

Merging cultural and social reform, he [Blaine] controls his property, “Rick’s Café Americain,” a nightclub where diverse peoples mingle in a pluralistic community and jazz music permeates the atmosphere, enacting dreams of a vernacular art and a more vital life. Rick also facilitates the escape of Jews from the Nazis, pays his employees high wages, and evokes the ideal of reciprocity across classes and isolation from Europe’s quarrels that threaten to entrap the New World citizen.<sup>166</sup>

The production of *Casablanca* exemplified the new political consensus in wartime Hollywood. It was produced by a studio famous by 1942 for its anti-Nazi, pro-interventionist, and pro-Roosevelt management, adapted both by liberal and radical screenwriters,<sup>167</sup> and utilizing large number of European émigrés from world-renowned actors such as Conrad Veidt and Peter Lorre to almost all of the extras and minor characters in Rick’s Café (who played almost all of Blaine’s refugees and employees). Additionally, *Casablanca* showcased the budding unity of the new United Nations by

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<sup>165</sup> *Casablanca*. DVD. Directed by Michael Curtiz, 1942. Turner Entertainment Co., 2012.

<sup>166</sup> May, 149.

<sup>167</sup> Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Koch were the primary screenwriters for *Casablanca*, which was adopted from the unproduced 1938 play *Everybody Comes to Rick’s* by Murray Bennett and Joan Allison. The Epstein brothers were traditional liberals, while Koch, a veteran of Orson Welles’s Mercury Theater, was a political independent who sympathized with the Communist Party. The writers were closely supervised in turn by producer Hal B. Wallis. (Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of Casablanca: Bogart, Bergman, and World War II* [New York: Hyperion, 1992 (2002 ed.)], 39-60).

reinforcing the idea of a pan-European Resistance critically assisted by the intervention of the United States, personified by a cynical expatriate who subsumes his personal feelings for the good of a wider cause. Blaine eventually chooses to do what is right, rather than what is personally satisfying, profitable, or morally expedient. Although he has been reunited with the love of his life Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) two years after her seeming callous betrayal during the fall of Paris to the Nazis, he realizes that her husband Victor Lazlo will need her at his side if he is to continue to fan the flames of the growing Resistance across occupied Europe. He gives the stolen exit visas to both Lazlo and Ilsa that will take them to America via Lisbon. A grateful Lazlo welcomes Blaine back onto the side of righteousness. As Lazlo alludes to in his farewell to Blaine, after all of the lost battles and lost causes of the 1930s left-wing antifascists, their cause cannot fail because it is inherently just and because it enjoys the backing of the free world's remaining great powers.<sup>168</sup>

Bogart played similar roles to Rick Blaine's conflicted protagonist during the war, including *Across the Pacific* in 1942, *Action in the North Atlantic* and *Sahara* in 1943, and *Passage to Marseilles* and *To Have and Have Not* in 1944. His biographers note that Bogart's different wartime roles—as an army intelligence officer in Panama, an expatriate in French Morocco, a sailor in the merchant marine, a tank commander in the Sahara desert, a journalist, and a sailor stranded in Vichy-controlled Martinique—were linked by conversion narratives, with each film each featuring an indifferent American protagonist in a hostile environment who must be educated about the dangers posed to the United States by fascism, which in turn leads to his participation in the multinational

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<sup>168</sup> *Casablanca*.

effort necessary to bring about the final victory over the Axis.<sup>169</sup> On the grandest scale, an antifascist Bogart protagonist found himself in the center of a United Nations armed force—made manifest in the form of the multinational convoy that must break through the U-Boat gauntlet to supply the Soviets in Murmansk in *Action in the North Atlantic*, or as its leader, such as an American tank commander who picks up disparate Allied survivors and forges them into a coherent fighting force that is above national and racial prejudice, and therefore is capable of defeating a German army in *Sahara*.

Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund argue that this emphasis on cooperation and teamwork (as seen in John Howard Lawson’s screenplays for *Action in the North Atlantic* and *Sahara* or Howard Koch’s contributions to *Casablanca*) are what distinguishes war-related message films scripted by left-wing screenwriters from other kinds of war-related Hollywood feature films. This teamwork was generally learned by example through two staples in American wartime cinema in the form of the multiethnic platoon and the multinational United Nations army. The war years seemed to herald a new spirit of acceptance for left wing and radical activists from both studio management and the Federal government. Screenwriters affiliated with the left, in particular with the Communist Party or else openly involved in the 1930s Popular Front antifascist campaigns of mobilization and agitation, were now called upon to utilize their political expertise for anti-Nazi message films.<sup>170</sup> Government policies further encouraged this assimilation of prewar “premature” antifascism into the political and cultural mainstream.

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<sup>169</sup> Sperber and Lax, 210. Bogart’s biographers note that the world-weariness and wisdom perceived in these famous wartime roles were reinforced by the relatively older ages both of Bogart and of many of the other actors surrounding him (Ibid, 209-210).

<sup>170</sup> Giovacchini, 139.

Under the aegis of the Office of War Information (OWI) and its Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), the major Hollywood studios were encouraged to produce message films that would explain America's ideological stake against the Axis, positively portray America's fellow Allied powers, and emphasize the promise of a better postwar world forged by the powers of the United Nations, particularly the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.<sup>171</sup> Many left wing and radical activists were further encouraged by the end of the doubt that been catalyzed by the 1939 Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact. Encouraged by the guidelines provided by the OWI and the BMP, as well as the propaganda (cinematic or otherwise) that celebrated the Russian contribution to the war effort, the Soviet Union was now included as a member of the "free world," albeit a nation with its own system of democracy comparable to the respective American and British traditions.<sup>172</sup>

Filmmakers aligned with the left were encouraged to emphasize the theme of domestic and international wartime unity in their works, and to avoid stoking any controversy that could potentially undermine this intended spirit. The consensus of the wartime American left supported the ban on strikes, the government's prosecution of antiwar individuals, and largely remained silent on the removal of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast to relocation camps further east. However, as Ceplair and Englund emphasize, the wartime Popular Front was not a political force that could easily best its foes, who were strengthened by the liberal left's declining electoral fortunes from 1942—the year that a conservative coalition of northern Republicans and Southern Democrats

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<sup>171</sup> M. Todd Bennett, *One World, Big Screen: Hollywood: The Allies, and World War II* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 36-37.

<sup>172</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 185.

came to dominate Congress in the midterm elections—to 1944, when the Democratic Party removed Vice President Henry Wallace, an advocate for a postwar “Century of the Common Man” from Roosevelt’s fourth presidential ticket in favor of the relatively unknown Senator Harry Truman. Although the initial efforts of the state and Federal anti-Communist politicians—in particularly the Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to investigate the presence of Communists in Hollywood had been blunted by a lack of popular interest and industry cooperation in 1938 (which had been followed by the fiasco of the isolationist-led hearings on Hollywood “pro-war” propaganda in 1941), the immediate postwar years would see the studio system, with encouragement from a Federal government now implacably hostile to the radical left, lead a campaign against any Communist or radical presence in the film industry. This campaign was catalyzed by the October 1947 Congressional hearings that would end in the indictment of the Hollywood Ten for contempt of Congress.<sup>173</sup>

The deteriorating environment for the American left, especially for the left’s more radical factions was reflected in postwar cinema, particularly through the films noir directed and written by left wing activists, both liberal and radical in their orientation. This pessimistic discourse on the part of the left in Hollywood can be seen in the 1948 Warner Bros. noir *Key Largo*, directed by John Huston, co-written by Huston and

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<sup>173</sup> The Hollywood Ten consisted of screenwriters Paul Jaricco, Herbert Biberman, John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner, Jr., Samuel Ornitz, and Alvah Bessie, producer Adrian Scott and director Edward Dymtryk. The Ten were part of a larger body of nineteenth “unfriendly” filmmakers subpoenaed by HUAC in October, 1947. The Ten were held in contempt of Congress for refusing answer committee questions, and were later given prison sentences of varying degrees of length. For further detail, see Chapter 9 (“Un-Americanism”) in Otto Friedrich, *City of News: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940’s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986 [1997 ed.]), 291-338.

Richard Brooks and based on a 1939 play by Maxwell Anderson about a Loyalist deserter from the Spanish Civil War, who redeems his abandonment of his comrades on the front lines by dying at the hands of gangsters who have taken over the hotel owned by the family of his best friend.<sup>174</sup> The film updates the play's pessimistic late-Popular Front message in part by upending the reassuring wartime Humphrey Bogart antifascist conversion narrative. This time, the protagonist's dislocation and the antagonists' hostility towards democracy is transferred to the United States. The film concerns the troubled reintegration of veteran Frank McCloud (Bogart) back into civilian life. The central conflict in *Key Largo* is between a protagonist scarred by war and a domestic world that does not live up to the promises that were made to the country's fighting men during the conflict against the Axis. Visiting James Temple (Lionel Barrymore) and his daughter Nora (Lauren Bacall), the father and widow of a friend killed on the Italian front at their hotel in the Florida Keys, McCloud and his hosts are taken hostage by a gang led by Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), after which the entire group is stranded inside by a passing hurricane.<sup>175</sup> Rocco, once a powerful criminal kingpin during Prohibition and since exiled to Cuba, believes that the end of the war heralds the opportunity he's been waiting for to return to his former glory. The hurricane effectively transforms him into the dictator of the hotel. In spite of his delusions of grandeur, Rocco is beset with insecurities stemming from the government's role in his exile, and he considers himself a true American regardless of his chosen career. "Like I was a dirty Red or something!" he

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<sup>174</sup> Sperber and Lax, 408.

<sup>175</sup> As a character, Johnny Rocco echoes Edward G. Robinson's breakout role as Caesar Enrico "Little Caesar" Bandello in Warner Bros.' *Little Caesar* (1931).

snarls at one point.<sup>176</sup> McCloud initially does little to hinder Rocco's aggression. Having lost his friend and witnessed the full horrors of war, McCloud is disillusioned with the world around him, a disillusionment that Rocco personifies with his callous disregard both for democracy and human life. It seems in spite of the great crusade against fascism, the sacrifices necessary for military victory appear all for naught. This cynicism on the part of McCloud is reinforced by an ongoing police manhunt for two Seminole men accused of a petty crime. Rocco, to throw the authorities further off of his scent, frames the Native Americans for a murder he committed, leading to both Seminoles dying at the hands of the police. Although the film ultimately has a happy ending, in which Bogart's Frank McCloud rediscovers, under the influence of Nora Temple, that it is always worth taking a stand against the forces of evil, *Key Largo* contained troubling questions for its audience: how safe were the people from those who would seek to do them harm? When evil manifests itself on the former Home Front, would the people even recognize its presence? These were moral questions that both reflected the end of the dreams and promises of the prewar and wartime New Deal and Popular Front left and the violence, corruption, and despair imagined to reside in the heart of the American dream through the lens of film noir.

#### Left-wing filmmakers and the postwar specter of fascism

One of the clearest cinematic legacies of the prewar and wartime Popular Front antifascist filmmakers can be seen in the production of antifascist and antiracist films noir

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<sup>176</sup> *Key Largo*. DVD. Directed by John Huston, 1948. Warner Home Video, 2006.

during and immediately after the Second World War. Lary May divides film noir into the broad categories of “left-wing” and “right-wing” noir, with left-wing noir consisting of films that attempted to address the social causes of crime and domestic racial prejudice, often through the lens of non-conformist protagonists.<sup>177</sup> Film noir as a whole was well suited to postwar narratives that imagined the threat still posed to American society by the agents of fascism, or fascistic individuals. This particular kind of crime or psychological thriller enhanced and continued the 1930s Hollywood tendencies to associate fascism both with gangster violence and foreign infiltration. The possibility for politically conscious films noir was strongly shaped by the erosion of the power of the Hollywood’s internal system of censorship, which had been irrevocably weakened by the demands placed upon the industry by the war. Sheri Chinen Biesen, in her study of the impact of World War II on the emergence of film noir in the early 1940s, notes that during the course of the war it stretched credulity for the Breen Office to argue that audiences exposed to the violence of the conflict, whether as soldiers on the front lines, as civilians receiving correspondence from friends and family abroad, or audiences watching newsreel footage of the aftermath of combat operations in the European and Pacific (and later still, footage captured by the Western Allies of the liberated Nazi concentration camps) still needed to shielded fictional depictions of graphic murder.<sup>178</sup> Writing of the violence and cruelty in postwar film noir, Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner

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<sup>177</sup> May, 220. May argues that in contrast to left-wing noir, right-wing noir can be seen in films that extolled faith in the institutions of government and law enforcement to correct any psychological, criminal, or political deviancy that the protagonist might find himself entangled in. (Ibid).

<sup>178</sup> Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

note, “Much of the pain inflicted in film after film had a thirties quality. Better, it offered an update: The cruelty then had not only social causes but cures; a decade later, it still had social causes, but possible cures and been practically ruled out.”<sup>179</sup> The popularity of film noir in the late 1940s coincided with dramatic structural changes to Hollywood studio system, most significantly in the Supreme Court’s 1948 decision in the *Paramount* case that mandated the dissolution of the film industry’s oligopoly, separating the major studios from their theater chains.<sup>180</sup> Left-influenced noir was further shaped by the brief surge in independent film production in the late 1940s. Among the most notable of these projects was Enterprise Films, which produced nine films, two of which included Abraham Polonsky’s *Body and Soul* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948).<sup>181</sup>

The forms and styles of film noir (popularly known as the “red meat cycle” during the war years)<sup>182</sup> held great attraction for left-wing filmmakers. Foremost, it served as a useful way to comment on the corruption, instability, and violence imagined at the heart of the American dream of social stability and economic security. These themes were often reinforced by urban settings notable for the use of on-location shooting (often under blackout conditions during the war), or the heavy use of rain and fog utilized to disguise the dearth of materials on the sets that were used. Film noir, often drawn from 1930s hard-boiled crime fiction or remakes of prewar European works, blurred the boundaries between the forces of law, order, and stability and the forces of chaos. Similar to the

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<sup>179</sup> Buhle and Wagner, 326.

<sup>180</sup> Welky, 336.

<sup>181</sup> In the first five years after the war, left-wing film noir was also brought to the screen by producers sympathetic to the goal of creating a more “mature” cinema, including Mark Hellinger, Dore Shary (the head of RKO), and Jerry Wald at Warner Bros (Neve, 95-111).

<sup>182</sup> Biesen, 96.

prewar Hollywood portrayals of fascism, the ideology's survival and continuity was often cast in close association with domestic concerns regarding organized crime, the persistence of racism and anti-Semitism, the prospective reintegration of combat veterans into civilian life, and the survival of the Nazis themselves outside of Europe. A strength of these particular postwar message films were the ways in which they integrated concerns about the endurance of fascism with many of the issues confronting postwar America, with a left-influenced antifascist sensibility that was especially pronounced in films noir with larger-than-life antagonists, films that warned of the resurgence of contemporary racism and anti-Semitism, and touched upon the impact of the war on returning veterans.

### Heroic villains and societal corruption

The origins for Chaplin's third message film lay with Orson Welles. In 1940 Welles produced a story outline for a black comedy about the career of the World War I-era French serial killer and swindler Landru, with Chaplin envisioned in the leading role.<sup>183</sup> Chaplin was enthusiastic about the idea, but preferred to direct the film himself. *Monsieur Verdoux* was Chaplin's third production of an openly political film. Unlike *Modern Times*, in which he maintained his role as the beloved Tramp even in the face of the Great Depression, or *The Great Dictator*, which maintained a hopeful albeit controversial ending calling for the return of all that was best in mankind, *Monsieur Verdoux* would serve as a commentary on the destruction of the recently concluded war.

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<sup>183</sup> Lingeman, 234.

The release of the film would set in motion a sequence of events that would eventually end in Chaplin being effectively exiled from the United States. The film was released to a national public that was primed by years of news stories regarding Chaplin's supposed Communist affiliations, and the wartime scandal of (wrongly) being accused of fathering a child out of wedlock.<sup>184</sup>

Chaplin's biting commentary on the scale and economics of mass murder offered audiences a variant of what Michael Denning has referred to as, in his discussion of the themes of fascism in the theater, radio, and film works of Orson Welles, a "hero villain." Denning characterizes many of Welles's memorable roles as hero villains for their larger-than-life tendencies mixed with a ruthless disregard for individual life and a shared democratic culture. The audience is placed in the uncomfortable position of rooting for the villain to succeed in his doomed quest for total power or at the very least to survive in the face of the forces of law and order closing in around him. Many of these roles, particularly those of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane* (1941), Franz Kindler/Charles Rankin in *The Stranger* (1946) and Harry Lime in *The Third Man* (1948) personify Welles's interpretation of fascism as a set of ideas and a set of conscious choices towards direct action and ruthless acquisition and motivated by a hatred of the people, either because of their innate inferiority or because they are in the way of a profitable criminal enterprise. As Denning notes in *The Cultural Front*, fascism as a concept and a form of public spectacle both repulsed and fascinated Welles throughout his career.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Robinson, 525.

<sup>185</sup> Denning, 377.

Chaplin's *Verdoux* is a hero villain in the sense that the audience is forced into the unpalatable tension of wishing for the film's central character to succeed in maintaining his cover while repulsed by the acts necessary to continue the charade. Verdoux carries himself as an impeccably dressed, world-versed, and articulate gentlemen, already far removed from the Tramp in appearance and manners.<sup>186</sup> Defending the film in *The Nation* from critics who seemed to be attacking the film based on Chaplin's new national unpopularity rather than on its actual content, James Agee argued that Chaplin successfully reinvented and improved upon the theme of surviving in a hostile world, noting,

(For Verdoux embodies much of the best that can be said of modern civilization, whether democratic-capitalist, fascist, or communist: whatever he may lack in the way of conscious, he does have brains...). The tramp is the free soul intact in its gallantry, innocence, eagerness for love, ridiculousness, and sorrow; we recognize in him much that is dear to us in ourselves. Verdoux is so much nearer and darker that we can hardly bear to recognize ourselves in him. He is the committed, dedicated soul, and this soul is not intact: we watch its death agonies. And this tragic process is only the more dreadful because it is depicted not gravely but briskly, with a cold savage gaiety; the self-destroying soul is rarely ware of its own predicament.<sup>187</sup>

Verdoux is an aging man who travels across interwar France seducing, marrying, and murdering wealthy widows under a string of assumed names and professions. The film opens with the clashing imagery of Verdoux disposing of his latest wife's remains in an outdoor crematorium while tending to a rose garden for his newest wife<sup>188</sup> (throughout the film, he is shown to be simultaneously married to many different women). Early in the narrative, the audience learns that Verdoux was driven into this life of adultery and

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<sup>186</sup> Lingeman, 234.

<sup>187</sup> James Agee, *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies* (New York: Modern Library, 1958 [2000 ed.]), 251.

<sup>188</sup> Lingeman, 235.

murder by being fired from his bank after decades of loyal service as a clerk. By the end of the film, Verdoux lacks even his original family, consisting of a beautiful wheelchair bound wife and a young son who perish off-screen in a tragic accident. The audience is only informed of their fate at the film's denouement, which comes in 1937 against the backdrop of the looming Second World War, reminded for the audience by a montage of newsreel footage showing the 1929 Stock Market Crash while Mussolini and Hitler address roaring crowds.<sup>189</sup> A young woman, who Verdoux had planned to test a new form of poison upon but spared due to her continuing devotion for her deceased husband, is revealed to have married a wealthy arms manufacturer, who appears enthusiastic for the prospective hostilities. Verdoux eventually allows himself to be arrested by the police, and at his trial he calmly states that his total number of victims amounts to nothing when compared to those who have been killed in recent wars by the products of arms manufacturers, going to his execution without the slightest hint of remorse.<sup>190</sup>

Two notable examples of fascistic larger-than-life hero villains outside of the message films of Orson Welles and Charles Chaplin were the antagonists of two left-influenced film noirs. In Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947), the an overcrowded and underfunded prison, nominally under the control of a spineless warden, is run day-to-day by Captain Munsey, a sadist who enjoys provoking the prisoners to violent outbursts. In one scene, Munsey assaults a restrained prisoner in his office to the strains of Richard Wagner.<sup>191</sup> Less obviously evil is Earl Janoth (Charles Loughton), the primary antagonist of *The Big Clock* (1948), adapted from the novel by the left-wing journalist Kenneth

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<sup>189</sup> *Monseieur Verdoux*, DVD. Directed by Charles Chaplin, 1947. Criterion, 2013.

<sup>190</sup> *Monsieur Verdoux*.

<sup>191</sup> *Brute Force*. DVD. Directed by Jules Dassin, 1947. Criterion, 2007.

Fearing.<sup>192</sup> Janoth controls an extensive media empire, headquartered in the Janoth Building in New York. Janoth, a thinly veiled caricature of Time Inc.'s Henry Luce, is a personification of *The Great Dictator's* charge of fascists being “machine men” with “machine minds” and “machine hearts”. Janoth is obsessed with controlling all aspects of his employees' lives, especially the use of time.<sup>193</sup> The heart of the Janoth Building is the titular big clock, which controls all of the other clocks in the building, therefore allowing its master to know the precise time in any corner of the world and the minute details of his employees' schedules. Janoth speaks in a consistently dry, mechanical monotone that lacks for variance even in the aftermath of his spontaneous murder of his former mistress in a child-like tantrum. Seeking to cover up his crime, Janoth attempts to frame his most skilled editor George Stroud (Ray Milland) of the Janoth-controlled *Crimeways* magazine. The crux of the film has the resourceful Stroud turn the tables on his former boss, during which he manages to momentarily halt the clock's operation. Janoth is so rooted in the cold, mechanical, and fatalistic environment of his private domain that he reads the stoppage of the clock with his own impending doom, which comes through his accidental stumble into an open elevator shaft.<sup>194</sup>

The traditional symbols of government benevolence and liberal administration are either absent or powerless to halt the abuses of these kinds of antagonists, who must be confronted through cathartic violence that mirrors the actions of the fascistic villains. In *Brute Force* the moderate warden and the liberal prison doctor are powerless to halt

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<sup>192</sup> Buhle and Wagner, 332.

<sup>193</sup> Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 105.

<sup>194</sup> *The Big Clock*. DVD. Directed by John Farrow, 1948. Universal Studios, 2004.

Captain Munsey's abuse of the inmates, an abuse that is enabled by support from a representative of the state who snidely dismisses the social causes of the prison's unrest such as overcrowding and the arbitrary brutality of the guards. Munsey's reign of terror only ends with his demise in a doomed prison revolt.<sup>195</sup> Likewise, Franz Kindler, the Nazi architect of the Holocaust hiding in a small Connecticut town (and engaged to the daughter of a retired Justice of the Supreme Court) is cornered and killed like an animal, rather than brought to stand trial. The pessimistic upending of normal means of legal recourse would be graphically illustrated in two antifascist veterans' noir films that openly broached the subjects of anti-Semitism and collaboration with Nazism.

“Personal fascism” and questions of guilt: *Crossfire* and *Act of Violence*

Among the long-term effects of the antifascist Popular Front and the wartime mobilization was the heightening of a Jewish consciousness among many Jewish activists in Hollywood, although this was generally not reflected in most anti-Nazi message films of the Second World War, even in those feature films contributed to by filmmakers sympathetic to the left. Similar to prewar antifascist works such as *The Life of Emile Zola*, *Black Legion* or *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, the fact of Jewish victimhood at the hand of the European fascist dictatorships, to say nothing of the Holocaust itself, remained obscured even in the most notable message films of the time. To use Fritz Lang's wartime noir *Hangman Also Die* as an example—a fictionalized version of the response of the Nazis against the population of Prague in the aftermath of the

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<sup>195</sup> *Brute Force*. Buhle and Wagner, 334-335.

assassination of Reinhard Heydrich—a Jewish prisoner is only shown as a single individual captured in a wider Gestapo raid.<sup>196</sup>

With the revelations of the Nazi atrocities in 1945, coinciding with changing conditions of film censorship and the heightened antifascist conscious in Hollywood, the parameters of openly showing Jewish victimhood at the hand of racists and anti-Semites shifted in a more open direction. Two message films from 1947, Twentieth Century Fox's *Gentleman's Agreement* and RKO's *Crossfire*, presented an opposition to anti-Semitic acts motivated by the assumption that Jews were somehow distinct from "true" Americans. Omer Bartov, in his history of the twentieth century portrayals of Jews in world cinema, argues that out of the two films, *Crossfire* pulls a more effective punch for integrating its political message with a murder mystery, for showing audiences the violent consequences of anti-Semitic hatred.<sup>197</sup> One of the most popular issues examined in Hollywood's social problem films of the immediate postwar years was the problem of reintegrating veterans back into civilian life. A consistent theme of these veterans'-themed films was that the protagonist's war was not over upon returning to the United States. *Crossfire*, released under the stewardship of producer Dore Shary<sup>198</sup>, articulated a view of anti-Semitism that was more closely linked to the discourses of the 1930s Popular Front left regarding racism, especially, as Judith Smith has noted, regarding the supposed interchangeability of different forms of prejudice with each other.<sup>199</sup> *Crossfire*

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<sup>196</sup> Friedrich, 126-129.

<sup>197</sup> Omer Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch my Holocaust* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>198</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 318.

<sup>199</sup> Judith E. Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 151.

was adopted from *The Brick Foxhole*, a novel by Richard Brooks about the impact of militarization and the violence of the battlefield on ordinary soldiers even after they returned to the United States. In the novel, the victim of the two violently racist and anti-Semitic GIs is a wealthy homosexual civilian. In the film, the victim is changed into the decorated Jewish veteran Joseph Samuels (Sam Levene). In his proposal to the management of RKO for the project, Adrian Scott argued that *Crossfire*'s effectiveness as a commentary on anti-Semitism lay in the universality that the crime of the psychotically anti-Semitic and racist GI Monty (Robert Ryan)<sup>200</sup> could symbolize for audiences.

This is a story of personal fascism as opposed to organized fascism. The story, in a very minor sense to be sure, indicates how it is possible for us to have a gestapo, if this country were to go fascist. A character like Monty would qualify brilliantly for the leadership of the Belsen concentration camp. Fascism hates weakness in people; minorities. Monty hates fairies, negroes, jews and foreigners. In the book Monty murders a fairy. He could have murdered a negro, a foreigner or a jew. It would have been the same thing. In the picture he does murder a jew. This analysis, incidentally, is absolutely correct in the opinion of the author. The picture would deal exclusively with Monty's anti-semitism.<sup>201</sup>

Monty eludes culpability for his murder of Samuels—which opens the film—by offering a distorted account of the events that led to him and two other GIs having a drink in Samuels's apartment. The audience is manipulated into at least partially believing Monty's story by the ingenious use of flashbacks. During the film, the same event is offered from different perspectives, with Monty ultimately exposed in his lies to Captain

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<sup>200</sup> In *The Brick Foxhole*, Monty Crawford, whom the film's Montgomery is based upon, is a former Chicago policeman with a violent hatred of African-Americans and Jews, and (as a result of his wartime experience) of civilians as well. Judith Smith observes that, "Crawford has all the markings of an enemy of the popular front." (Smith, 369, note 24).

<sup>201</sup> Ceplair and Englund, 453.

Finlay, leading the investigation. Monty's opposites in the film are Captain Finlay and Keely (Robert Mitchum), Monty's superior officer and a reporter in civilian life (sympathetic to the New Deal in Brooks's novel).<sup>202</sup> While Sergeant Keely is meant to demonstrate that right-thinking soldiers reject such acts, it's Captain Finlay who is used as the positive counter-example to Monty's murderous bigotry. In his story prospectus for RKO, Adrian Scott proposed that Finlay's status as an Irish-American, whose immigrant grandfather was murdered in a nineteenth century anti-Irish riot, could be used as an effective rhetorical tool against anti-Semitic violence and intolerance in general. Finlay's familial connection to the consequences of societal prejudice enhances his place as the film's representative of the 1930s and 1940s political left, appearing both in his opening scene and during his anti-racist speech beneath a portrait of Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>203</sup> The film expresses an implicit hope that good governance and men of good intention can finally put a halt to racial violence, although, as James Naremore points out in his history of film noir, the film also turns progressive discourse regarding class and race on its head by positing Monty and his confederates as representatives of mob rule and the "unenlightened".<sup>204</sup> Similar to *Brute Force* and *Key Largo*, the traditional sources of justice, once presented as unfailing in their line of duty under auspices of the Production Code Administration, are shown to be absent. Monty is ultimately gunned down under the direction of Finlay and Sergeant Keely rather than being taken into custody to be condemned by a prosecutor or judge.

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<sup>202</sup> Smith, 146.

<sup>203</sup> Giovacchini, 196.

<sup>204</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1998 [2008 ed.], 121.

Robert Ryan was utilized again in a veteran's noir, this time as a victim of fascism rather than as a perpetrator of fascistic aggression. *Act of Violence* (1949), directed by Fred Zinnemann, is notable for addressing the interlinking issues of collaboration and survivor's guilt, and for delving into the brutalizing effects of the war (and living under the Nazi regime) has had on ordinary American soldiers. The film opens with Joe Parkson (Ryan) limping out of his New York apartment, concealing a pistol, and departing for Los Angeles. The audience eventually learns the target of his monomaniacal aggression is none other than his former commanding officer, one Frank Enley (Van Heflin), a happily married contractor who enjoys the respect of the city for building the new suburb of Santa Lisa.<sup>205</sup> During the course of the film, as Enley attempts to hide from the wrath-consumed Parkson, it is revealed in to Enley's wife by both Parkson and Enley himself that the former Air Force officer was responsible for aborting a mass escape attempt from a German prison camp, and indirectly responsible for the terrible consequences afterwards. Enley breaks down and admits to his wife, in a bleak concrete stairwell behind a raucous, debauched developer's convention that he betrayed the escape organized by Parkson and the other American POWs to the Nazi commandant in the hopes of avoiding the massacre that would await a failed attempt to escape. The commandant promised mercy, but instead had all of the American POWs shot, with Parkson barely escaping with the injury that has left him with his limp.<sup>206</sup>

The narrative of the film punishes Enley for both his wartime betrayal and postwar material comfort. The fear of what Parkson intends to do to him drives Enley

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<sup>205</sup> Brook, 208.

<sup>206</sup>Ibid; *Act of Violence*. DVD. Directed by Fred Zinnemann. Warner Home Video, 2007.

away from his recently completed suburban home. During his confession to his wife, done against the din of a party of businessmen, Enley rebuffs her attempts to reassure him for the reasons behind his actions by bluntly drawing a connection between his collaboration with the Nazi commandant of their prison camp and his own selfish material desires.

“You can always find reasons. Even the Nazis had reasons...I hadn’t done it just to save their lives. I talked myself into believing it, that [the commandant] would keep his word. But in my guts from the start I think I knew he wouldn’t. And maybe I didn’t even care. They were dead and I was eating and maybe that’s all I did it for, to save one man—me.”<sup>207</sup>

Driven afterwards into the streets of the windswept inner city as far removed from Santa Lisa as wartime Germany, Enley, drunk and desperate, hires a man to kill his pursuer. His redemption comes when, having a change of heart, he takes the bullet meant for Parkson, earning a measure of forgiveness from his former comrade-in-arms. The selfless act also serves as a catharsis for Parkson from his endless physical pain and discomfort caused by his limp and magnified, as Vincent Brook notes, but his all-consuming desire for vengeance.<sup>208</sup> Although the conflict in *Act of Violence* is resolved, the film, like other left-influenced veterans’ noir suggests that the memory of the conflict will remain a permanent scar on the national landscape, a wider version of the contrast between a middle class suburb and the grime and dives of inner city Los Angeles.

### Legacies and Impact

The question of whether or not the left-influenced antifascist feature films of the 1930s and 1940s were successful in their intent of raising the consciousness of their

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<sup>207</sup> Quoted in Brook, 208-209.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 209.

audiences can best be answered if contrasted to another postwar attempt by the major Hollywood studios to produce message films that would interest audiences while aligning themselves with the prerogatives of the Federal government and vocal pressure groups, in the form of the wave of anti-Communist “films rouge” that were released during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Several of these productions, most explicitly in the case of *The Red Menace* (1949) attempted to repeat several important prewar and wartime antifascist tropes within the boundaries of the national anti-Communist discourse. Communism was portrayed as an alien ideology antithetical to true American values, while Communist true believers were characterized as little more than gangsters. Those filmmakers who had been associated with progressive, antifascist organizations yet who managed to avoid the blacklist were often called upon to lend their expertise to new projects intended to raise the consciousness of their intended audiences. Saverio Giovacchini notes,

On another level, the continuity between the 1930s paradigm and the anti-communist films of the late 1940s offered to those Hollywood progressives who had been marshaled into anti-communist productions the opportunity to continue to think of themselves in a tradition that was in opposition to the studio system.<sup>209</sup>

The films rouge of the 1940s and 1950s failed to bring audiences back to a box office. They were too explicit in their propaganda and too crude in their caricatures to be taken seriously by audiences, even in works that consciously tried to copy prewar antifascist feature films, most notably in the case of *The Iron Curtain* (1948), which was based on

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<sup>209</sup> Giovacchini, 211. *The Red Menace* is interesting for its uneasy mixture of a Popular Front-style ethnic pluralism with a wartime antifascist-style conversion narrative, now directed against Communism. During the course of the film several characters, all members of the Los Angeles branch of the mafia-like Communist Party, including an Irish Catholic woman, a Jew, an African-American, and a veteran all turn against the organization, usually after getting a lecture from a respectable member of society on the evils of Communism.

the true story of the defection of a Soviet agent to Canada, and written by Milton Krimm, the co-writer of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.<sup>210</sup> These flaws are particularly glaring when set against the wartime message films that successfully merged an antifascist ethnic pluralism and class consciousness with pro-Allied narratives. The blacklist removed an entire generation of politically knowledgeable screenwriters and potential directors and producers, which affected the overall quality of American cinema at a time when the studios were buffeted by the rapid expansion of the television and the collapse of the “classical” systems meant to tightly control the entire process of film production.

Although the 1930s and 1940s political left in Hollywood was severely circumscribed by Congressional investigation, industry blacklist, and shifts in popular taste, it left behind cinematic visions of the American people and its enemies that reflected the highest ideals of national unity in the face of international aggression and terror. If there was no dawn in the late 1940s akin to the morning light in *Crossfire* that illuminates the Washington, D.C. skyline to conclude a speech extolling tolerance and condemning bigotry, there was also the reality that the entertainment industries could not return wholesale to business practices that attempted to remove controversial subject matter to shield their audiences from a harsh reality, especially when the audience found itself placed by filmmakers in the center of the conflict imagined to exist between dictatorship and democracy and between fascism and the people.

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<sup>210</sup> Giovacchini, 211-215.

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