

## Cinema as Propaganda during the Third Reich

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### Abstract

The use of film as a method of propaganda is a powerful tool, and it is one the Nazis used quite efficiently. From bluntly political films that had clearly stated goals, to subtle artsy films that hid the message behind entertainment, the full gamut of genre and style can be found in the over 1,000 films produced by the Nazi Regime. These films can be broken down even further into the subjects: Kampfzeit, Führerprinzip, Blut und Boden, Enemies of the Reich, War, and Escapism. This article seeks to educate the reader about Nazi Cinema, rather than argue its varying degrees of success. When a film has the power to drive people to the streets, its desired effect is in evidence. It is impossible to get a clear view of this particular subject through literature, thus the films themselves are referenced as well. Only the most successful or most applicable films were used. For example: Triumph of the Will was both very successful and applicable, but Ich klage an (although reasonably successful) was chosen for its relevance to the topic of Blut und Boden. And what of the Audience? Goebbels and his Ministry of Propaganda accounted for all parts of society. His efforts did not go to waste.



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## Cinema as Propaganda during the Third Reich

Propaganda has been, and always will be, the ever present companion of government throughout human history. Those in power must constantly assure the general public that they are the best people for the job, that to upset the status quo would be detrimental, and that certain truths are unconditional. If these “truths” are expressed with a certainty, it will draw people in. The advent of mass media, in this case film, has advanced the ability of propaganda to pervade society and take hold. Film possesses the unique quality of connecting a vast audience of people all at once with an ideology through emotions like: empathy, sympathy, joy, sorrow, anger, and so on. Unlike flyers and pamphlets (which can be annoying and ignored), and mass rallies which attract people who already believe what is being said, film attracts people from all demographics and promises them a night of entertainment and relaxation. Under the guise of entertainment, a message can be repeated over and over, eventually burying itself deep within the psyche of a population. This ideal now becomes part of their belief system, and people will fight to defend their beliefs. The leaders of the National Socialist German Workers Party understood the value of film propaganda well. Between 1933 and 1945, 1,090 films were produced for the German public, including 6 in the year 1945, even though the enemy was less than 50 miles from Berlin.

Despite Joseph Goebbels apparent worship of Adolf Hitler, and his agreement concerning the base ideals of good propaganda (that it should be simple, and repeated often), the Propaganda Minister and his Führer had varying opinions pertaining to the methods of using film as propaganda. Hitler believed that propaganda was only useful while the party was small and weak as a way to increase popularity and therefore power.<sup>1</sup> In *Mein Kampf*, for instance, he said, “If propaganda has imbued a whole people with an idea, the organization can draw the consequences with a handful of men.”<sup>2</sup>

Goebbels saw the use of propaganda as something far greater. Rather than just garnering initial party support before the seizure of power, it could be used to maintain constant enthusiasm for the Nazi cause during peacetime *and* during war, and to preempt any resistance by creating a mass population of loyal civilians who would betray dissenters to the Gestapo. In *Triumph of the Will*, a film that records the 1934 party rally in Nuremberg, Goebbels states quite bluntly, “May the bright flame of our

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<sup>1</sup> David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema: 1933-1945* (London, 2001), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston, 1999), 582.

enthusiasm never be extinguished. It alone gives light and warmth to the creative art of modern political propaganda.”<sup>3</sup>

Because of these marked differences in opinion, Goebbels and Hitler had very different ideas concerning how propaganda was to be portrayed in film. Whereas Hitler wanted film to be expressly used as a tool for blunt propaganda, Goebbels realized the potential for spreading Nazi ideologies through subtle, artsy films. He also saw the benefits that escapist entertainment could have on the population as a whole, especially in wartime. In his book, *Propaganda and the German Cinema: 1933-1945*, David Welch coins the terms 'Lie Direct' and 'Lie Indirect' to pertain to these differing opinions. “Lie Direct” refers to the blunt, overtly political method of displaying an idea to the masses. As Hitler himself once said, “It makes me sick when I see political propaganda hiding under the guise of art. Let it be either art or politics.”<sup>4</sup> 'Lie Indirect', on the other hand, encompasses what the Führer was referencing. According to Goebbels, the people needed to be slowly warmed to these ideas, not have ideology bluntly thrown in front of them. Overtly political films had their place, but should be used sparingly, “...because the moment a person is conscious of propaganda, propaganda becomes ineffective.”<sup>5</sup> By creating entertaining and escapist films, Goebbels could subtly transmit the desired behavior to the general public and receive positive results.

There are two ways that I have chosen to classify these films. The first is by whether or not they are overtly political ('Lie Direct') or hiding behind art ('Lie Indirect'). Aside from that is the separation of the films into categories by which overriding principle they represent. If you look at all the films made by the Nazis from a broad standpoint, the subjects generally fall into one of six categories: *Kampfzeit*, *Führerprinzip*, *Blut und Boden*, Enemies of the Reich, The Importance and Greatness of War, and closer to the end of war, Escapism and the ideal of 'Holding Out'.

The principle of 'Lie Direct' is first and perhaps best embodied in the films that dealt with the *Kampfzeit* or “Time of Struggle”. This term refers to the early years of the National Socialist movement before Hitler gained power. The three major films that typify this are *SA-Mann Brand*, *Hans Westmar*, and *Hitlerjunge Quex*. All three were released in 1933, shortly after the Nazis officially came to power, and all three are blatantly pro-party.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted directly from the film *Triumph of the Will*.

<sup>4</sup> Welch, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Welch, 38.

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*SA-Mann Brand* was the first of these, hitting German theaters June 14<sup>th</sup> of 1933, and it depicted the last few tumultuous months of the Weimar Republic. It left nothing to the imagination as it painted the situation in stark black and white. There is a marked difference between the SA (*Sturmabteilung* or Stormtrooper) camp, which is depicted as the Aryan ideal, and the Communist headquarters, which is filthy and full of drunken rabble. This film, whether purposefully or unintentionally, set patterns which the next two films in particular, and other Nazi films in general, can be seen to follow. The first is the depiction of the protagonist's parents. In *SA-Mann Brand*, Brand's father is a devoted Social Democrat and a slave of Weimar's decadence, Brand is a devoted Nazi, and his mother is somewhere in between, attempting to be a mediator between her husband and son.<sup>6</sup> When a member of the Hitler Youth dies for the Nazi cause, the stereotype of the "loyal martyr" comes into play. This was another plot device that many films in the Third Reich would use.

*SA-Mann Brand* was, surprisingly, not well received by many Nazis. A review written about the film in Goebbels' Newspaper, *Der Angriff*, said:

*...the director, Franz Seitz, has attempted to produce an epic account of the Unknown SA Mann, and in doing so, to recreate the glorious myth of the SA for the cinema screens. Unfortunately, Seitz and his team have neither the talent nor the competence necessary for a film of this importance. To capture the epic qualities of the SA requires a vision of the grandest scale.*<sup>7</sup>

Now, it is not known if that was Goebbels' writing or whether he just supervised it being written, but the review is definitely representative of Goebbels' opinion of the film. A reason for this might be that Goebbels was not going to be happy with anything he didn't have a hand in, and he had yet to take complete control of the film industry by this point. He also might have disliked the artistic direction the film took, as many did. Some saw the film as an exercise in cheap emotionalism. One party member said years later, "Just because people weep and sob in the stalls does not necessarily mean that it is a good film, as this reaction can be induced by any 'sham' art."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Welch, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Welch, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Welch, 49.

The other attempt at extolling the SA in film was *Hans Westmar – Einer von vielen* based on a book by Hanns Heinz Ewers. The book in turn was based on the life of one of the earliest Nazi martyrs, a man by the name of Horst Wessel. Wessel is famous for many things. As an SA man, he displayed a talent for converting Communists to the Nazi cause. He is also known for writing the poem that effectively became Germany's second national anthem after “Deutschland über alles”, called “Die Fahne Hoch”, which is usually referred to as the “Horst Wessel Lied”. When he was only 22, he was killed by a Communist gunman over a dispute with his landlady. Goebbels took his martyrdom as an opportunity to create an upswing of pro-Nationalist and anti-Communist sentiment.

The film, *Horst Wessel*, commissioned by Hitler, was banned the day it was released by Goebbels' propaganda ministry for being “...detrimental to the memory of Horst Wessel.”<sup>9</sup> Goebbels himself announced that he “...had known Horst Wessel, and the figure in the film neither resembled him nor conveyed his character”<sup>10</sup> and that he saw “no particular value in having our stormtroopers march about on stage or screen. Their place is on the street.”<sup>11</sup> Goebbels eventually had to let the film be seen, due to the severe backlash his sudden ban had received, but before he let it happen he made sure the film made absolutely no allusions to Horst Wessel, and even had the name of the film changed from “Horst Wessel” to “Hans Westmar”.

The third example of *Kampfzeit* is the film *Hitlerjunge Quex*, and is about a boy named Heini Völker. *Hitlerjunge Quex*, like *Hans Westmar*, is based on a real person named Herbert Norkus. Herbert was a Nazi messenger boy that was killed by Communists, and thus became a martyr for the Nazi cause. In the film, Heini's father is a Communist and a war veteran, and at one point beats Heini until he sings the Communist anthem “Die Internationale” with him. Heini is sent to camp with the local Communist youth, but he does not fit in with them as they are portrayed as drunken, promiscuous riffraff. He sneaks off, only to discover the Hitler Youth camp. Heini is astonished at how patriotic and proper they are, and from that point on wants to be a Nazi. When he betrays the Communists' plot to blow up the local Hitler Youth headquarters to the Nazis, the Communists decide that he needs to be dealt with. His mother finds out, and leaves the gas on that night in an attempt to kill them both (to save

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<sup>9</sup> Welch, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema* (Cornwall, 2007), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema* (New York, 1975), 35.

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Heini the pain of being tortured and killed by the Communists) but only succeeds in killing herself.

With his mother dead and his father still a member of the Communist party, Heini joins the Hitler Youth and moves into the HQ. At the end of the film, Heini, now called Quex (quicksilver) by his Nazi comrades, risks life and limb to distribute National Socialist flyers in a Communist controlled area of the city. He is eventually cornered by the Communists whose schemes he had betrayed to the Nazis, and joins the ever growing list of Nazi martyrs. Of the three films produced about the *Kampfzeit*, *Hitlerjunge Quex* was “The best crafted of the three films and the most successful at the box office, it was also the only one to please Goebbels.”<sup>12</sup> The film was so popular that it ran until 1942.

The ideal that best represents National Socialism is not anti-Semitism or the superiority of the Aryan race (although they are definitely crucial aspects); it is not the need for *Lebensraum* (living space) or even the inferiority of the Slavs. The *Führerprinzip*, or the belief in the Führer Hitler as the pinnacle of leadership, was the very backbone of the Nazi belief system. Without Hitler, there was no National Socialism, no Third Reich. He was very nearly seen (if not completely seen) as a god to his Nazis, and even when things went wrong in the Third Reich and corruption abounded, it was never Hitler's fault. The local leaders were blamed and people regretted that the Führer did not know what was going on, because he would fix it if he did. This ideal of perfection accounts for a large portion of films during the Third Reich. And it was not just films concerning great leaders, for Hitler was more than just a great leader, he was a genius. There were films about great poets like Friedrich Schiller, sculptors like Andreas Schlüter, scientists like Paracelsus, and of course leaders like Otto von Bismarck and Frederick the Great.<sup>13</sup> These men represented the perfect Aryan ideal, and to the Nazis, Der Führer Adolf Hitler surpassed them all.

Der Führer himself starred in a film extolling his greatness. *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, was a “documentary” about the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally. This film is the epitome of 'Lie Direct', which makes sense once Hitler's own personal involvement is considered. It made no efforts to hide its message behind art. Despite this, it was a creative masterpiece. The images portrayed in this film are undoubtedly

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<sup>12</sup> Tegel, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Welch, 124.

what we equate with pre-war Nazi Germany today. The parade of followers saluting Hitler while he stands in his car, the mass rallies of people shouting “SIEG HEIL!” over and over while Hitler and top party officials speak, the depictions of the Labor Front and the Hitler Youth, the prominently displayed Nazi eagles that recall the glorious and unyielding eagles of imperial Rome, and perhaps most dramatically, Hitler's messianic descent into Nuremberg through the clouds in a plane, all leave the viewer in awe of Der Führer and his Reich. Hitler is displayed exactly how he wanted to be seen, and no other movie was made about him afterwards (though he has a small role in *Olympiade* also by Leni Riefenstahl). There was simply no need to openly extol him further.

Frederick the Great, or “Old Fritz”, was a favorite topic amongst German audiences, and his presence on the silver screen was not limited to the Nazi era. In fact, between 1922 and 1942, ten films were made about him, and only the last three of those were made during Goebbels' reign as Propaganda Minister. He was the perfect example of the Prussian model, and was a German father figure. The last film made about him while the Nazis were in power was *Der Grosse König*, a film so successful that it was awarded the annual “Film der Nation” prize by Goebbels. This film, directed by the famous Nazi director Veit Harlan, contained a message that Goebbels found very valuable. He wrote,

*“The times of the Seven Years War which Frederick the Great had to suffer had a vast number of similarities with the times for which we today may be prepared. Their example will make the German people recognise where we stand and where we must march to”*<sup>14</sup>

However, Goebbels realized the possible danger of overtly comparing Hitler with Frederick, instead of letting the people come to the conclusion themselves. It came down to his belief of 'Lie Indirect' and the idea that people should not outwardly be told what to believe. He, in fact, “forbade the drawing *in public* of 'any analogy with the present [situation]”<sup>15</sup> especially in regards to the beginning of the film where a negative attitude prevails. Goebbels wanted people to realize how similar Frederick the Great and Hitler were for themselves, focusing on the positive aspects of the comparison like brilliance and a willing to sacrifice all for Germany.

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<sup>14</sup> Julian Petley, *Capital and Culture: German Cinema 1933-45* (London, 1979) 109.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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The other figure who the Nazis reveled most in comparing Hitler to was another Prussian: Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck was the 'Iron Chancellor' who, in 1871, oversaw the unification of the German states into one united German Empire. There were two films made about him during Nazi rule: *Bismarck* and the much asked for sequel *Die Entlassung* (The Dismissal). Emil Jannings, the actor who portrayed Bismarck as an older man in *Die Entlassung* and who was a sycophant of Bismarck's, drew a line in history "from Frederick the Great to Bismarck to Hitler"<sup>16</sup> and added that "This is the right perspective, since in fact these three names represent the same historical situation - one man against the world."<sup>17</sup>

An interesting aspect of the portrayal of Bismarck is the topic of his view of socialists. He agrees with their aims, as long as they are Nationalist and not Internationalist, because he believes that the people are the future of Germany. Indeed, the real Bismarck said that socialism "is not an international but a national concern...We must aspire to a German state socialism – but directed from above and not under pressure from the streets."<sup>18</sup> At the end of the film, after Bismarck has resigned from his office as Chancellor, he gives a monologue about the continued survival of Germany. His last words on screen are: "What must remain is the Reich, if people and Reich become one, then the Reich too will be eternal...My work is done. It was only a beginning. Who will complete it?"<sup>19</sup> Despite no conclusions being drawn in public, it is fairly safe to say that a direct connection with Hitler and his Reich was made by viewers. The Reich *was* Der Führer.

One of the few ideals that the Nazis maintained throughout their rule was the idea of *Blut und Boden* or "Blood and Soil". This doctrine referred to the mythical past of the Aryan race and the desire of the National Socialists to regain the sacred land that their predecessors, the *Herrenvolk* (Master Race), had held. It extolled the virtues of the rural peasantry who still lived off the land and knew the value of the sacred German soil. Supposedly, the rural peasant was the ideal that devoted Nazi idealists like Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler saw as the movement's ultimate goal. This belief encompassed many things: the sacredness of the ancient German soil that had been divided throughout history and further restricted by the Versailles Treaty, the fate of the *Völkische* (ethnic

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<sup>16</sup> Leiser, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Petley, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted directly from the film *Die Entlassung*



Germans outside the Reich), the perfectness of the Aryan race, and the duty of all Aryan people to maintain that perfection. Films that fit into this category generally belong under the designation of 'Lie Indirect', for on their face they are entertainment and art films.

The sacredness of German soil is perfectly captured in the film *Eniger Wald* (Eternal Forest). This film is a nature documentary, and the growth and decline of the forest is shown to correlate exactly with the growth and decline of the German people. When the people are prospering and living in relative comfort through their hard work, the forest is seen to be healthy and far reaching, with strong trees in abundance to provide the industrious Germans with necessary lumber. When outside forces come to conquer, the forest is burned, and so the people and forest suffer simultaneously. Eventually, the heroic Aryan people throw off their bonds and begin to multiply and prosper once again. Accordingly, they begin planting trees so that the forest may prosper as well.<sup>20</sup>

The symbiotic nature of this relationship is portrayed bluntly, and it is exceedingly obvious that the film is trying to deliver a specific message. However, unlike overtly political films, a film like this can get away with being blunt. *Eniger Wald* merely shows German viewers that they have reached greatness in the past when they showed respect to, and worked with, their sacred homeland, and that they must heal that homeland for them to rise again.<sup>21</sup> Because it does not extol National Socialism, but rather the German people, the message need not be hidden.

In the years preceding World War II, Hitler became more and more preoccupied with the fate of the *Völkendeutsche*, and began to use it as an excuse for the territory he took in Czechoslovakia, Austria, and the Sudetenland, amongst others. The film *Heimkehr* (Homecoming) portrays the ethnic Germans within Poland in the short time before the Nazis crushed it with the blitzkrieg and started the Second World War. There is not much of an overarching plot, as the movie is just several separate incidents connected by their “emotional intensity.”<sup>22</sup> The various stories show how cruel the native Poles are to the ethnic Germans, epitomized in a scene where Poles attack an innocent German girl, rip the Swastika

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<sup>20</sup> Hitler considered sustaining the forests of Germany so important, that he even made Herman Göring “Reich Minister of Forestry”.

<sup>21</sup> This film also conveyed the Nazis' desire for the *Anschluss* (unification with Austria) and the recovery of all the territory that was German in ancient times.

<sup>22</sup> Welch, 110.

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medallion from her clothes, and stone her to death.<sup>23</sup> It was a surprisingly successful film, considering it was released in 1941, two years after concern for the *Völkische* had reached its peak. By the time it hit theaters, the German public had other things to worry about.

The superiority of the Aryan body is exemplified in the film *Olympiade* which depicts the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> As the pinnacle of athletic competition, the Olympic Games were the perfect opportunity for Nazis to finally display how superior the Aryan race was in comparison to the other races of the world, and in a sense they did (The Nazis won more medals that year than any other country). However, that attitude of superiority was restricted to the stadium for the duration of the Games. To prepare for the coming of the world to Berlin, Hitler ordered that all anti-Semitic and racist signs and posters be taken down, and the newspapers severely censored. He wanted to welcome the world with open arms to glimpse his perfect society, and his ploy was remarkably successful. Little did his guests know that Sachsenhausen concentration camp was under construction fewer than 25 miles from the stadium.

The film, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, is four hours long, took two years to make, and is split into two parts: Festival of Beauty, and Festival of the Nation. *Olympiade* is an extensive film that goes to great lengths to display the German body as perfection. Hitler believed quite blindly that the Dorian tribe of Ancient Greeks must have originally emigrated from the Germanic north, and it is obvious that his goal was to return to that supposed perfection. On one occasion, when he saw a photo of an attractive female swimmer, he said “What splendid bodies you can see today. It is only in our century that young people have once again approached Hellenistic ideals through sports.”<sup>25</sup> It was this blind and reckless pursuit of perfection that led to the first mass killings propagated by the Nazi regime.

Surprisingly enough, the first people to be killed systematically by the Nazis were not Jews or even Socialists. To protect the Aryan race as a whole from “infection”, the first to die were Germans that were incurably diseased, handicapped in any way, or criminals. These Germans were seen

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<sup>23</sup> Leiser, 69.

<sup>24</sup> That the Nazis held the Olympics may seem surprising in hindsight, but it must be remembered that they had only been in power for three years at this point. The Weimar Republic had won the bid for the games to be held in Germany in 1931, two years before Hitler's appointment as Chancellor.

<sup>25</sup> Welch, 95.

as “bad stock” and could not be allowed to reproduce. At first, these examples of “inferior human material” were simply sterilized to prevent a continuation of their imperfect genes.<sup>26</sup> It was not long before sterilization was not enough, and the idea of euthanasia began to grow. It is simple Social Darwinism at its base, and Hitler was a staunch Social Darwinist. The problem was convincing the general public to feel the same way.

The movie *Ich klagte an* (I accuse) was made to test the waters. It is a story about a professor of medicine named Thomas whose wife comes down with a fatal illness: multiple sclerosis. He devotes himself completely to finding a cure, but has no luck. She is dying. Thomas estimates that she has two months left to live. Two months of unbearable pain in a paralyzed body before she dies, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. So, he administers an overdose of medicine, and therefore gives his wife a painless release from a life of suffering. The rest of the story is spent in the courtroom, for his brother-in-law calls the police and has him arrested for murder. During the trial, the big question is whether or not she asked for her husband to kill her, because there were no witnesses to what is depicted as a tender goodbye between two people who love each other very much. Thomas refuses to speak, because he does not feel that he needs to defend what he did. The jurors debate back and forth about the ethics of euthanasia (the learned teacher supports it, the pious farmer does not), but the film ends before a verdict is made. Because this film was made to gauge public opinion, a verdict would spoil the results. Leaving the ending open to discussion was a good way for the Nazis' to get a look at what regular Germans thought about euthanasia. However, as we know all too well today, the Nazis' plans went farther than simply euthanasia.

“The cult of hatred and xenophobia is the cheapest and surest method of obtaining from the masses the ignorant and savage patriotism which puts the blame for every political folly or social misfortune upon the hand of the foreigner.”<sup>27</sup> The entire National Socialist ideal is built on the backs of scapegoats. From the *Dolchstoß* (stab in the back theory) that permeated German culture after the humiliating defeat of the First World War, to the idea that the other inferior races of the world were responsible for all the world's ills, scapegoats were used constantly to gain and retain power. Of all the emotions that a group can share, hatred is among the strongest and

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<sup>26</sup> Welch, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Welch, 204.

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most binding. Rarely do massive political rallies spring into being because all who are involved love something. It is no mistake that the word “mob” has such bad connotations. The ability to unite a people through hatred is a powerful tool, and it is one the Nazis, and Goebbels in particular, excelled at. Goebbels knew all too well that “propaganda points out enemies that must be slain, transforming crime into a praiseworthy act...it opens the door and allows him to kill the Jews, the bourgeois, the Communist, and so on, and such murder even becomes an achievement.”<sup>28</sup>

As far as the film world depicts, the first major opponent to the Nazi regime was the local Communist party. In all three of the *Kampfzeit* films, the Communists are depicted as drunken, slovenly, and ruthless killers. They represent everything evil and un-German through their ideals of the international proletariat community. They are godless heathens, and several of the main Communists in these films are depicted with Jewish and Asiatic features. After the death of Otto von Hindenburg, and Hitler's assumption of supreme power, the Nazis no longer attacked Communists within the Reich, for they were no longer competition. The depiction of local Communists now changed to Russian Bolsheviks abroad. They were portrayed as the epitome of the *Untermenschen* (subhuman), slaves to liquor and the flesh, controlled by the godless Jewish conspiracy: Communism.

The portrayal of Bolsheviks in Nazi film was very fickle. Up until they signed the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, the Nazis portrayed the Bolsheviks as *Untermensch*. Once the pact was signed, the Russians were shown in a “sympathetic light”<sup>29</sup> in films like *The Postmaster* and *Bismarck*. Anti-Communist films came back into vogue, however, when Hitler invaded Russia in 1941. This constant changing between what Goebbels was telling the general public to believe about Russians caused some confusion, and ultimately reduced the anti-Communist propaganda's effectiveness to marginal.

The British were another enemy/ally that propaganda dealt with quite prolifically. Before World War II, the British were usually regarded with respect. Even in films that dealt with Germany's defeat during World War I, the British are shown to be a strong, skilled, and honorable enemy. During this time, Hitler is known to have “expressed sentiments of

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York, 1968), 152.

<sup>29</sup> Leiser, 43,

'Nordic similarity.'<sup>30</sup> Goebbels had to be careful to not upset the British too much, and risk endangering Hitler's attempts at pacifying Great Britain.

After Great Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, however, the depiction of the average Englishman changed drastically. The anti-British/anti-Semitic film *Die Rothschilds Aktien von Waterloo* depicted the British, as Goebbels claimed, as the "Jews amongst Aryans", and was released in theaters the day after Hitler issued the directive for the invasion of Great Britain.<sup>31</sup> This movie debuted when anti-British sentiments were at their all-time high, and it brings to light a new aspect of the Jewish conspiracy, the myth of the "British Plutocracy". This myth explained that evil capitalist plutocrats controlled Great Britain from behind the scenes, and these weak and easily controlled men were influenced to do so by international Jewry. The film is about a Jewish banking family (The Rothschilds) who, in the mind of the Nazis, were taking over the world through international finance. Another movie, *Die Sauvegard* (The Safeguard) is about a Jew who lies and spreads rumors throughout European financial institutions to raise certain stock prices.<sup>32</sup>

The Nazis also portrayed the British as evil and cruel imperialists (ironic if you consider that extensive imperialism is exactly what the Germans planned), in films such as *Ohm Krüger*, which was a depiction of the Boer War. In *Ohm Krüger*, the British are seen to be ruthless, and the British General takes the war to a new level (a level that is similar to Hitler's, showing once again the extreme hypocrisy in Nazi cinema) by stating that "certain military conventions which may be applicable in normal circumstances...are misplaced in Africa", and that to defeat the Boers, the Germans must "burn their farms, separate wives and children from their menfolk, and put them in concentration camps...No distinction is to be made between soldiers and civilians."<sup>33</sup> The part of *Ohm Krüger* that struck the biggest chord with German audiences was the scene where English Christian missionaries are seen "distributing bibles to the natives with one hand and guns with the other while piously singing the national anthem with the Union Jack draped over the altar", showing them as a weapon of the British imperialists.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tegel, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Tegel, 131.

<sup>33</sup> Leiser, 100-101.

<sup>34</sup> Welch, 232.

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Unfortunately for the Nazi Propaganda Ministry, the depiction of the British in film had the same problems as the depiction of the Bolsheviks. Sometimes they are shown as good, sometimes bad, and even when the evil Brits are shown, they tended to differentiate between the two. Again, this back and forth caused confusion amongst viewers as to what they should believe, and reduced the anti-British propaganda's effect to a negligible amount.

It is common knowledge today that Jews were the antithesis of National Socialism. This rampant anti-Semitism is not unique to the National Socialists, however. Anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism have been around in Europe for thousands of years. As the great novelist Aldous Huxley once explained,

*Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The Propagandist is a man who canalises an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain.*<sup>35</sup>

The Nazis only had to latch on to the already existing feelings toward the Jews, and expand them. The idea of international Jewry as the basis for all the ills of the world extended into practically every film they made. When the Nazis speak of Communism, it is shown to be a Jewish conspiracy. When they describe the evils of the British plutocracy, they explain that the British have only fallen to this degenerate state because they allowed the Jews to infiltrate and destroy their greatness.

In the racial ideology that the Nazis perpetrate, the pyramid of superiority analogy is often used. The Aryan race is, of course, at the pinnacle, and as you go down the Blacks and the Gypsies are at the bottom. The Jew is not even on the pyramid, because he is not human. He is a plague. Although Jewry is depicted as the evil force in the background of most of the Nazi films that pit the Germans against an enemy, there was a trilogy of films released that dealt with the Jews primarily. *Die Rothschilds*, which was mentioned earlier, caricatures the international banker Nathan Rothschild as a ruthless and cunning financier who is disliked by his peers. There is a scene in the film where he throws a lavish banquet and invites all the bigwigs, but no one attends. In the background, you can hear the sound of everyone he invited enjoying themselves at a party next door. His agent tells him that no matter how much money he has, or how high he climbs

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<sup>35</sup> Welch, 237.

in society, he will always be a “poor Jew from the Jewish Alley of Frankfurt”<sup>36</sup> In the film, he finds out that Napoleon has been defeated at Waterloo before anyone else. By telling the British market that the British army has been defeated by the French, he creates a panic that he takes advantage of to make millions. This man is shown to be exploiting innocent people to make money, and is therefore painted as evil. If the message that it was the Jews causing all this suffering was not obvious enough, Nathan pulls out a map at the end of the film to show another character the extent of his family's power. He connects the Rothschild centers of power on the map, and when he is finished, he has drawn the Star of David.

The second film in this trilogy of xenophobia and hatred is the “historical” film *Jud Süß*. It was based on a real person and a real event that the Nazis skewed to fit their aims. Süß Oppenheimer was the Minister of Finance for Karl Alexander, the Duke of Württemberg. In the film, he is seen to get very close very quickly to the Duke through financial means, and before long he is practically in control. He convinces the Duke to allow the Jews into the city, and begins a series of severe taxes and regulations. At the end of the film, he rapes a German girl (the one the film characterizes as the epitome of Aryan-ness) and convinces the Duke to stage a military coup and name himself King. As the people, fed up with how things have been going, begin to stage a coup of their own, the duke dies of a heart attack, leaving Süß without the protection he had relied on so heavily. The last scenes of the film depict his trial and execution.

The whole film is outrageously anti-Semitic, yet the state newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, praised the film for “its complete avoidance of bias, and its clear demonstration of how a previous attempt in miniature to subjugate a country foreshadowed the later aspirations towards domination of the whole globe.”<sup>37</sup> This is another example of the ever present hypocrisy in Nazi cinema. In the same sentence, it praises a film for lack of bias and then for its anti-Semitic depiction of Jews. That means that, surprisingly enough, *Jud Süß* is placed in the 'Lie Indirect' category by Goebbels himself. The Film was extremely successful. One audience member was quoted as saying “One feels like washing one's hands afterwards.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, the scene where the Jews are entering the city of

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted directly from the Film *Die Rothschilds Aktien von Waterloo*

<sup>37</sup> Leiser, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Welch, 245.

## Cinema as Propaganda during the Third Reich

Stuttgart caused repeated demonstrations against local Jews. In Berlin, people shouted "Drive the Jews from the Kurfürstendamm!" and "Throw the last of the Jews out of Germany!"<sup>39</sup>

*Jud Süß* was, in fact, so successful, that when the pseudo-documentary *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) came out a short time later, most people were not really interested. People would describe it as a "strain on the nerves" and say things like "We have seen Jud [Süß] and we've had enough of this Jewish filth"<sup>40</sup> This film, blatantly anti-Semitic and therefore categorized as 'Lie Direct', was much better received by radical party members, and covers practically every aspect of the claims made against the Jews by the Nazis. It shows the ghetto and the filthy homes the Jews supposedly "chose" to live in (naturally omitting that they live in the filthy ghetto out of compulsion). It depicts the Jews just as the Nazis see them, as corrupt moneylenders with no real contribution to society. They are shown carrying on their immoral business even as they prayed in their synagogues. The film depicts Jewish children out trading as well, and explains that they start young. The potential threat towards the purity of German youth is not stated verbally, but strongly alluded to. There is a scene that shows some forced Jewish labor, and the old men who are digging seem to be having a difficult time with it. The narrator explains that this is due to the fact that they have never worked with their hands before, and are ill equipped to be useful in such a way.

There is then a segment that threatens the ability of the Jew to blend in to whatever country he may find himself in. Several eastern Jews are shown who are obviously Jewish with their curls, beards, and caftans. They are shaved and given haircuts and new clothing, and suddenly pass as Western Europeans. This, the narrator threatens, is a dangerous ability, for you may not know who the enemy is. A comparison is then made, quite proficiently, between rats, who are the representation of the cunning underground animal that spread disease and destruction, and the Jews who play that role for mankind. Through an animated map, comparison is made of the historical migration of world Jewry with the historical migration of rats. They are, not surprisingly, extremely similar. This comparison was a remarkably effective propaganda tool.

The next section had much more to do with the financial, political, and cultural power of the Jews, discussing the Rothschilds and other

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Welch, 253.



prominent Jews, and showcasing the “Degenerate Art” that the Jews have created. The last segment that discussed the Jews, and the most controversial<sup>41</sup>, was an “accurate” depiction of the way Jews slaughtered animals to make the meat kosher. This involves bleeding out the animal while they are still alive, and the animal loving Nazis were horrified by this sight. The tone of the film changes in the end, by switching to montages of ideal Aryan stereotypes. The music changed as well; there was a “turgid Oriental flavour the moment the Jews appeared on screen...Nordic people, on the other hand, were accompanied by Bach.”<sup>42</sup> This change in tone had an instant effect on the emotions of those watching the film. This glorious ending left people feeling much better about the situation, because they knew they could trust their Führer to handle the problem.

To meet any of the goals that the Nazi sought, war was inevitable. The ideal of *Lebensraum* (the need for living space) and the desire to rid the world of the Jewish Problem could not be pursued during peacetime. At first, the war provided the Propaganda Minister with few problems. War had been an integral part of their propaganda from the beginning. However, their success was inescapably linked with the success of the war effort. For example: few, if any, war films were released after the defeat at Stalingrad in 1943, and those that were are more about the German will and holding out for victory. The German people did not want to hear how great the Army was when it was losing.

The best example of how Goebbels exploited the war for propaganda purposes are the *Deutschen Wochenschaun* (German Newsreels) which by 1938 were compulsorily placed before every single feature film. Such newsreels were not unique to Germany; the English and American governments created similar newsreels for their war propaganda. However, the compulsion put on the film industry *is* unique to the Nazis. The war unfailingly produced copious amounts of great footage for the newsreels, and patrons to the theaters were always kept up to date with current events and the goings on of the war. That began to slowly change as the Germans began to lose, but that is to be expected. This shows in the attendance of the newsreels. Between 1938 and 1941, the newsreels were so popular that people would attend the theater just to see them, and then leave before the main attraction began. Once Germany began to

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<sup>41</sup> Women and children were strongly advised to see an edited version of the film with this scene cut out.

<sup>42</sup> Leiser, 85.

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experience setbacks in the war, people were seen standing outside the theater and waiting for the newsreels to finish before they went in.<sup>43</sup>

As the Germans began to experience setbacks in the war, the focus of Goebbels' Ministry began to change somewhat. More and more films came out that had no real propaganda value behind them. They were pure escapism, and Goebbels, rightly so, realized that they were needed. With all the stresses of war piling up, constantly being told about them was not helping the morale of the average German theater-goer (generally women by this point). So you can see that more and more romances are released like *Die grosse Liebe* or *Romanze in Moll*. In some ways, this was Goebbels attempt at mollifying the public, and he was fairly successful. Theater attendance actually rose as the war went on. For example: in 1944, 1.1 Billion movie tickets were sold, and on average people went to the theater 14 times a year. Considering that 1944 was the year Americans landed at Normandy and liberated Paris, that statistic is pretty impressive.

The motif that you tend to find in the final years of the war is the idea of staying strong and holding out. The perfect example of this is the film *Kolberg*, which was released just seven months before the fall of Berlin. It is a loose depiction of the fortress town Kolberg during the Napoleonic wars. In the film, the defeatist military leadership of this little town wants to simply surrender to Napoleon without a fight. But the people, under the direction of their Mayor (A man named Nettlebeck), decide they are going to resist the French themselves. The message that this film portrays is that though the enemy may be on our doorstep, your duty as a German citizen is to stand and fight the foreign invaders till the last man. There is a great line towards the end of the film that is undoubtedly of Nazi origin, and not drawn from history as they would like the audience to believe, where the new military leader, Gneisenau, tells Nettlebeck that they've lost and he should surrender. Nettlebeck is horrified by the idea and says:

*But we haven't fired our last bullet yet!... You were ordered to Kolberg, but we grew up here. We know every stone, every corner, every house. We're not letting it go even if we have to claw into the ground with our bare hands. In our town we don't give up. No, they'll have to cut off our hands to slay us one by one. You can't disgrace me by surrendering our town to Napoleon. I even promised our King that we would rather be buried under the rubble than*

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<sup>43</sup> Welch, 170.

*capitulate. I've never pleaded to anyone, but I get down on my knees,  
Gneisenau. Kolberg must not be surrendered!*<sup>44</sup>

Gneisenau pulls Nettlebeck to his feet and says somewhat triumphantly, "That's what I wanted to hear from you, Nettlebeck. Now we can die together."<sup>45</sup> Ironically, only a couple months after the film's debut, the city of Kolberg itself had to be evacuated in the face of the advancing Russian army. This was of course withheld from the press, lest the entire point of the film be lost amidst chaos and despair.

Unfortunately, very little is known about the actual demographics that attended the theater during the Nazi era, but it is safe to assume that the two biggest groups were women and the youth. Because the Nazis believed a woman's place was the home, and not out working or serving in the military, women had more free time than practically any other demographic. As such, they required something to fill all that time. What better way to waste time than by enjoying a day at the movies? Once the war began, and the German men were out fighting, the women had even more time and became an even larger portion of the movie going population. It was also the women who Goebbels spent a great deal of time placating with his myriad of escapist films about love and romance.

However, there was a section of the public that was far more important to the Nazis to win over. The youth. If you think about it, a boy who turned twelve the day the Nazis gained power in 1933 would be 18 by the invasion of Poland, and ready to serve. They were the soldiers of tomorrow, and the Nazis started training them young, through various youth groups like the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls. Nazi films that were deemed especially valuable for youth were shown in schools as a mandatory part of the curriculum. In 1934, the *Jugendfilmstunde* (Youth Film Hour) began to occur on a monthly basis, and by 1936 it had upped its occurrence to weekly. Only the finest films were shown, and were often accompanied by guest speakers who explained how the film should be interpreted and led the youth in discussions following the screening. After 1936, punishment was threatened if a Film Hour was missed, and so attendance became for all intents and purposes compulsory.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted directly from the film *Kolberg*

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Welch, 20-21.

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Once the war started, these Film Hours became increasingly valued by Goebbels, and an extensive network of mobile theaters was created to make sure everyone was able to experience the new film. This can be seen by the dramatic increase in the number of *Jugendfilmstunde* performances per year. Whereas in 1936 there were only 905, there were 8,244 the year the war began, and by 1942/3 the number had shot up to over 45,000.<sup>47</sup> A perfect summation of the value of the Nazi cinema for the indoctrination of the German youth came from the spokesmen of the German youth organizations. He said: "Thanks to the National Socialist film educational work, youth is directed towards the heroic and is therefore psychologically prepared and entirely capable of withstanding all pressures."<sup>48</sup>

Joseph Goebbels and his Ministry realized the potential of the cinema as a tool of propaganda, and abused this power more efficiently than any other governments of their time. Goebbels himself had a very strong opinion about how propaganda should be defined and employed, and there is a veritable treasure trove of quotes from the man concerning the very topic. For example, "the essence of any propaganda is to win people over to an idea which is so profound and so vital that in the end they fall under its spell and cannot escape from it"<sup>49</sup>, "the intention [of propaganda] should not be revealed to avoid irritating people"<sup>50</sup>, and "Propaganda does not have anything to do with truth. We serve truth by serving a German victory."<sup>51</sup>, just to list a few. Goebbels was very successful with what he did. He created a population of people ready to fight for the Nazi cause, and die for their Führer. He did this in more ways than just film, naturally, but he believed so strongly in the ability of film to convey a message without identifying itself as propaganda that he spent a great deal of time, money, and overall resources on the German film industry. His effort did not go to waste.

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<sup>47</sup> Welch, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Welch, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Leiser, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Leiser, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Welch, 33.

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### Filmography

The following abbreviations are used: Dir (Director) Sc (Screenplay) LP (Leading Players)

*Bismarck* (1940) Dir: Wolfgang Liebeneiner. Sc: Rolf Lauckner, Wolfgang Liebeneiner. LP: Paul Hartmann, Friedrich Kayssler, Werner Hinz.

*Die Entlassung* (1942) Dir: Wolfgang Liebeneiner. Sc: Curt Johannes Braun, Felix von Exkardt. LP: Emil Jannings, Werner Krauss, Werner Hinz.

*Der ewige Jude* (1940) Dir: Fritz Hippler. Sc: Eberhard Taubert.

*Eniger Wald* (1936) Dir: Hans Springer.

*Der grosse König* (1942) Dir: Veit Harlan. Sc: Veit Harlan. LP: Otto Gebühr, Kristina Söderbaum, Gustav Fröhlich.

*Hans Westmar* (1933) Dir: Franz Wenzler. Sc: Hanns Heinz Ewers, from his book *Horst Wessel*. LP: Emil Lohkamp, Paul Wegener, Carla Bartheel.

*Heimkehr* (1941) Dir: Gustav Ucicky. Sc: Gerhard Menzel. LP Paula Wessely, Peter Petersen, Atilla Hörbiger.

*Hilferjunge Quex* (1933) Dir: Hans Steinhoff. Sc: Karl Aloys Schenzinger, Bobby E. Lütthge, from the novel by Karl Aloys Schenzinger. LP: Heinrich George, Berta Drews, Claus Clausen.

*Ich klage an* (1941) Dir: Wolfgang Liebeneiner. Sc: Eberhard Frowein, Harald Bratt, from the novel *Sendung und Gewissen* by Hellmuth Unger. LP: Heidemarie Hatheyer, Paul Hartmann, Mathias Wieman.

*Jud Süß* (1940) Dir: Veit Harlan. Sc: Ludwig Metzger, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, Veit Harlan. LP: Ferdinand Marian, Werner Krauss, Heinrich George.

*Kolberg* (1945) Dir: Veit Harlan. Sc: Veit Harlan. LP: Heinrich George, Kristina Söderbaum, Horst Caspar.

*Ohm Krüger* (1941) Dir: Hans Steinhoff, with Herbert Maisch and Karl Anton. Sc: Harald Bratt, Kurt Heuser. LP: Emil Jannings, Lucie Höflich, Werner Hinz.

*Olympiade* (1938) Dir: Leni Riefenstahl. Sc: Leni Riefenstahl.

*Die Rothschilds AKA Die Rothschilds Aktien von Waterloo* (1940) Dir: Erich Waschnek. Sc: C.M. Köhn, Gerhard T. Buchholz, Mirko Jelusich. LP: Carl Kuhlmann, Hilde Weissner, Herbert Hübner.

*S.A-Mann Brand* (1933) Dir: Franz Seitz. Sc: Joseph Dalman, Joe Stöckel. LP: Heinz Klingenberg, Otto Wernicke, Elise Aulinger.

*Triumph des Willens* (1935) Dir: Leni Riefenstahl. Sc: Leni Riefenstahl.