

Hollywood's Early Cinematic Responses to Nazism

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Michael E. Birdwell. *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.'s Campaign against Nazism*. New York: New York University Press, 1999. xxi + 266 pages. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 (cloth); \$19.50 (paper).

Despite the widespread presence and significant influence of Jews in the American film industry during the 1930s, Hollywood mounted virtually no active opposition to Nazism before World War II. In fact, the overall record of the studios matches the ostrich-like behavior of most of the world as Germany intensified its attacks on Jews. Much like IBM, whose conduct has been documented in Edwin Black's controversial *IBM and the Holocaust*, Hollywood remained reluctant to criticize the Nazi regime or defend the rights of German Jews. The cynical attitude of business as usual reigned. Morality took a back seat to the profits that could be gained from Germany.

Amid this lamentable apathy to the plight of German Jews, at least one courageous figure took a stand. Harry Warner, the quiet, devoutly religious brother of flamboyant Jack, led Warner Brothers studio to risk censure, profits, and public condemnation for the sake of revealing the threat of National Socialism. Harry's efforts culminated in the 1942 general release of *Sergeant York*, with Gary Cooper playing the title role. Michael Birdwell, a cultural historian at Tennessee Tech and curator of the Alvin C. York papers, tells the story of Harry Warner's cinematic efforts to oppose Nazism and the gradual enlistment of Sergeant Alvin York, America's greatest war hero at the time, to support military intervention against Germany. Enriched with archival material from Warner Brothers and the York papers, *Celluloid Soldiers* traces how momentum gradually shifted from isolation to intervention.

Hollywood's film activity during and immediately after the Depression consisted primarily of escapism from economic hardship. Warner Brothers, however, tended to make films with more of a social conscience. Darryl Zanuck

had established a Warner Brothers trend of making films that sided with the underdog. Among the major studios, only Warner Brothers focused on ordinary, working-class people and on taboo topics such as American hate groups. These preferences brought the studio on a collision course with the Production Code Administration (PCA), the industry's own content controller.

As early as 1932, Harry Warner sensed the dangers that Nazism posed. He decided not to acquire Germany's Universum Film studio, and had Jack Warner terminate all business with Germany after July 1934. Warner Brothers quickly began its cinematic attacks on Nazism. In 1933, *Bosko's Picture Show*, a Looney Tunes cartoon, lampooned Hitler as an incompetent fool. Unfortunately, PCA director Joseph Breen, supported by the State Department, took a dim view of films that might offend Germany. Warner earned the rancor of the PCA with two important anti-Nazi films that preceded the famous *Sergeant York*.

Black Legion (1937) documented the criminal activities of the domestic fascist group The Black Legion. Members of this Midwestern terrorist organization preached nativism and practiced violence against perceived threats to "true" Americans. From 1931 to 1937, the group assassinated important labor organizers, bombed buildings, and participated in fifty-seven murders or attempted murders. The resultant film, although fictional, had the tone of a documentary. It portrayed the inevitable course of ruin that anyone would follow who succumbed to hate groups. Although the Black Legion conspirators are brought to justice in the film, it avoids a sugar-coated finale. Brutality and intolerance flourished within America, and Warner Brothers had revealed it.

Probably the most direct indictment of Nazism came from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939). This film established the template for cinematic portrayals of Nazis as cold, ruthlessly efficient sadists (76). *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* fanned fears that Nazis had infiltrated America and were undermining democracy. The film was promptly banned in several countries that wanted to maintain cordial relations with Nazi Germany. Nazi propaganda retaliated by accusing Americans of hypocrisy in light of their segregationist practices. A victim of mixed reviews and a public craving for escape from tensions of the day, the film did not draw large audiences. Warner Brothers, however, kept trying to raise consciousness about the perils of Nazism. After war was declared in Europe,

they began courting Alvin York, the greatest American hero of the First World War.

York's actual life provided a ready-made script for the myth of the humble hero. Raised in backwoods Tennessee, York was a minimally educated, down-to-earth homebody who preferred game hunting to public speaking. Warner Brothers correctly identified York as the larger-than-life mythic hero who could spur America to action against Nazi Germany. The task was not easy. York, suspicious of Hollywood glitter and too familiar with the horrors of war, was no interventionist. His slow conversion paralleled America's gradual emergence from isolationism. The invasion of Poland spurred York to act.

Rhetorical critics will find most interesting the interplay between York and Charles Lindbergh that chapter 5 details. Lindbergh, an American hero from his transatlantic flight, used his stature to promote his political stance. He traveled across the country promoting American isolationism. Lindbergh even accepted Hitler's invitation to visit Nazi Germany in 1937 and 1938, receiving a medal from Göring during the final trip. When war broke out in Europe on 1 September 1939, York became convinced that America needed to act. York quickly saw Hitler as a dangerous evil, eventually referring to him publicly as "the Anti-Christ of prophecy" (147). Lindbergh remained enthralled by National Socialism and admired the powerful *Luftwaffe*. The stage was set for a classic confrontation between two genuine American heroes. York lobbied for greater American aid to Britain, and the fall of France convinced him that it was time for Americans to realize that war might be the only way to assure freedom (136). Lindbergh's isolationist allies formed America First, which opposed American involvement in the war. York, speaking in favor of intervention, increasingly took aim specifically at Lindbergh and America First. The increasing intensity of his pleas for intervention would make excellent material for a detailed rhetorical analysis. As events worsened for the allies in Europe, York's verbal rapier became sharper. Referring to Lindbergh's voluntary resignation of his Army Air Corps Reserve commission effective 28 April 1941, York attacked "such isolationists and appeasers as Senator Wheeler and ex-Colonel Lindbergh, and ex-President Hoover" (139). By September 1941, Lindbergh was railing against influential and wealthy "Jewish groups," especially media moguls, who were "agitating for war" (143).

It is sometimes difficult to find reliable archival material that documents the oratory of two popular heroes on opposite sides of the same issue. An ongoing debate such as that conducted by York and Lindbergh offers an excellent opportunity to analyze a dynamic controversy. Birdwell narrates the verbal jousting, but because he does not employ an analytical framework, it is difficult to assess the relative merits of the speeches. As a homespun, plainspoken man with a third-grade education, York enacted a style and demeanor that contrasted sharply with the dashing figure of Lindbergh.

The final uphill battle for Warner Brothers as well as for the film industry in general occurred on 1 August 1941. On that date Senate Resolution 152 launched an investigation of the film industry. Hard-line Senate isolationists who engineered the investigation alleged that Hollywood was “dedicated to warmongering, that it constituted a Jewish-controlled monopoly, and that it was engaged in covert dealings with the Roosevelt administration” (154). Thus one function of the hearings was to give public legitimacy to anti-Semitism. Senators Gerald P. Nye (Montana) and Bennett Champ Clark (Missouri) co-sponsored S.R. 152. The actual hearings proved to be a dress rehearsal for the McCarthy hearings a decade later.

The Hollywood studios procured former Republican Presidential candidate Wendell Willkie to defend them. The committee refused to allow Willkie to cross-examine or call witnesses, and Warner Brothers was fingered as the ringleader of Jewish warmongering propaganda. The hearings continued until 26 September, never reconvening after the American declaration of war. Harry Warner thoroughly undermined the credibility of Senator Nye by reading a telegram Nye sent praising *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, one of the films in question. The conduct of the investigation was incompetent and embarrassing to the non-interventionists. Ironically, the same Senate that was hounding the film industry quickly enlisted their aid to develop films educating the public about Nazism after America joined the war.

The Nye-Clark hearings present fertile ground for communication scholars. The selections Birdwell includes preview rhetorical tactics that would come into play during the McCarthy era: conspiracy theories, shifting the burden of proof, and large doses of what Richard Hofstadter aptly termed “the paranoid style.” The Nye-Clark hearings have additional historical significance:

they played perfectly into the arguments Nazi Germany was using to justify the repression of Jews throughout Europe. If Jews fomented war, then their oppression seemed a logical defensive measure.

This book contains several useful resources and research avenues. A ten-page timeline traces the course of events for Nazi Germany, Warner studios, and Alvin York from Hitler's becoming Chancellor (30 January 1933) to the commercial release of *Sergeant York* (4 July 1942). In his postscript, Birdwell calls for more cinematic documentation of American fascist sympathizers prior to World War II. Hollywood has contributed to the misconception that all Americans united against Hitler, with Hollywood graciously doing its part. The difficult path from isolationism to involuntary participation in World War II has received almost no attention. A similar lack of coverage holds in the field of communication studies. Virtually no research has examined domestic fascism in America, and the bitter debates regarding America's proper role in the war from 1939 to 1941 have escaped sustained attention. These areas, as Birdwell observes, offer excellent prospects for further research.

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the discourse surrounding American military action acquires greater urgency. Perhaps contemporary discussions regarding armed retaliation, invasion, and covert action would become more nuanced and enlightened with some attention to rhetorical history. If nothing else, such a retrospective could generate some wisdom about when and why to resurrect war heroes, military experts, and maybe the ghost of Franklin Roosevelt.

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