

Popular Ideology: The Cinema of Nazi Germany

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Abstract

Between 1933 and 1945, the German film industry was transformed from a group of independent movie studios into a branch of the Nazi government. As part of the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, headed by Dr Joseph Goebbels, the German cinema became an integral part of the Nazi effort to ideologically indoctrinate the population of Germany. However, the industry continued to operate in the same commercial manner as it had previously, producing films intended to appeal to paying German audiences. Because the cinema continued to function as a popular consumer marketplace, the varying film tastes of German filmgoers continued to influence the types of films produced even as Goebbels labored to transform the German cinema into an ideological weapon. Thus film production under Nazi Germany was not only the product of Goebbels ideological goals, but also public taste.

This paper traces the Nazi's efforts to control the film industry, in the process examining a number of films that illustrate both Goebbel's changing propaganda goals and the German public's shifting taste in films during the Nazi regime. Box office records from the years leading up to and following the outbreak of World War II provide new insight into German consumption of films and serve to illustrate the high degree to which the German public supported the war.

In context, the popularity of specific films and types of films over time reveals not only how Goebbels' adapted his propaganda to the changing circumstances, but also how the filmgoing German public reacted to those same events as a group and the change in those responses over time.

Popular Ideology: The Cinema of Nazi Germany

When Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or NSDAP) came to power in 1933, Germany had the second largest and most popular film industry in the world.¹ Over the course of the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945, film was transformed from a largely unrestricted medium of artistic expression of the Weimar period of 1918-1933, into a tightly controlled means for the state to influence the very thoughts and emotions of German filmgoers. This systematic manipulation of the medium to rigidly enforce ideology stands largely without precedent in the history of the cinema.

Between 1934 and 1942, the German film industry underwent a series of radical reorganizations, as Dr Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, set about bringing all the major German film studios under his personal control. His aim was to use the cinema as an instrument of Nazi ideology. However in the process of bringing the industry under his control, he had to reckon with the tastes of the German filmgoer. Germans had very cosmopolitan tastes in films, characterized by interest in genres ranging from comedies and love stories to dramas, historical films and adventure stories. In order to ensure the best possible reception for his ideological content, Goebbels had to be particular about the manner in which a motion picture incorporated propaganda. As such, he employed films that subtly displayed and encouraged National Socialist tendencies independently of the film's content. As Germany's circumstances changed over the course of the Nazi

¹ Kristin Thompson, *Herr Lubitsch goes to Hollywood: German and American film after World War I*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 18.

regime, Goebbels propaganda themes changed in response to broader events. At the same time, the popular reception of these themes forced Goebbels to re-evaluate his propaganda in order to improve the ideological impact.

The cinema of Nazi Germany occupies a peculiar place in history. Historians tend to frame it in terms of opposites, on the one hand arguing it could represent the wholesale abuse of film as a medium, subverting the power of the motion picture to an evil ideology for purposes of world domination and global destruction.² On the other, these films can be considered prime examples of the beauty and power of cinema to inspire the viewer and instill emotions.³ What these historians of the Third Reich tend to fail at is separating out the agenda from the mechanisms and practices. Because of the nature and associations of this subject, I feel it necessary to establish from the onset, that the Nazis were responsible for human suffering on a massive scale seldom seen, such that their name is synonymous with any institutionalized practices of murder, violence and repression. There is no way around that. One could go so far as to say there are no acceptable avenues for the historian to rationalize their actions. From that perspective, it is relatively easy to condemn their cinema, and indeed any cultural undertakings from the period, as products of an inherently evil system without any merits. It would follow that there is no further purpose in studying them. It should be fairly obvious this not the case. Many of the films produced in Nazi Germany are counted among the greatest cinematic triumphs.

² Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8.

³ Ibid, 9.

Today, popular sentiments regarding the Nazi regime tend to represent the period in terms of contemporary notions of evil, as a repressive state that abused its citizens. This representation of National Socialism is embodied in the film perhaps most often identified with the period, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will.)⁴ The film presents scenes of mass spectacle, disciplined obedience to authority, rigid conformity, and a god-line cult of leadership in what is widely recognized as one of the greatest works of propaganda ever made. Studies on the cinema of Third Reich during the last twenty years have been largely critical of Leni Riefenstahl's impact on Nazi cinema. Despite her role as a prominent actress and Adolph Hitler's favorite director, her influence on contemporary images of Nazism seems to have been much more pronounced than her contribution to the larger body of films made under the Third Reich. The most important personality in Nazi cinema, rather, was Joseph Goebbels, whose role as the Minister of Propaganda afforded him complete control of the film industry and its output. While he was responsible for producing cinematic propaganda, as his title suggests, ideological films made specifically at his request account for only a small portion of the total output of feature films made during the Nazi regime.⁵ In recent years, a number of studies have challenged the degree to which Goebbels actually exerted control over film production, and the notion that the entire film industry was subverted into a platform for National Socialist ideology.

⁴Susan Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema*, (London, Continuum Books, 2007), 6.

⁵ This tendency may date back to the 1940s, when the United States released the propaganda series *Why We Fight*. Directed by Frank Capra, it presented Americans with images of the Nazis taken directly from *Triumph of the Will* to illustrate the Nazi war effort. Ian S. Scott, "Why We Fight and Projections of America: Frank Capra, Robert Riskin and the Making of WWII Propaganda" in *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 249.

Interest in the cinema of the Third Reich has become increasingly popular since the reunification of Germany and the opening of the East German archives in 1990, releasing a wealth of previously unknown documents regarding the film industry. Numerous studies have revealed a murky and disparate picture of the German film industry under Nazi Germany. For all the contradictory conclusions about the state of film production under the Nazis, the majority of these studies consistently establish the same events and themes.

For this paper, the most important study conducted on the cinema of Nazi Germany is *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945* by David Welch. His book attempts “to trace various components of the ideology which recur in the cinema of the Third Reich, in order to discover what this reveals about the nature of propaganda in general and the ideology of National Socialism in particular.”⁶ While he is examining propaganda as it relates to Nazism, a fundamentally different issue, his research and interpretations underlie a significant portion of this thesis. I tend to disagree with some of his conclusions, specifically regarding Goebbels’ intentions regarding certain films, and his tendency to pass judgment in the course of his analysis. However, the scope of his work is largely congruent with my own, and I make frequent references to his argument and research.

Other studies have been highly informed by critical film. Some of these focus on specific cross-sections of films, such as the *Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* by Eric Rentschler. A film historian, he focuses on feature film (*Spielfilme*)

⁶ David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, (London: I.B. Taurus), 1.

production with the goal of highlighting the connections between politics and entertainment. However, despite his revisionist approach, the author bluntly states:

“The Cinema of the Third Reich is to be seen in the context of a totalitarian state’s concerted attempt to create a culture industry in the service of mass deception. The Ministry of Propaganda endeavored to... remake German Film culture in the service of remaking German culture and the nation’s political body.”⁷

He seems to suggest that the only way to look at German cinema of this period is as deliberate attempts at reeducating the masses with Nazi ideology. Despite an approach newly informed by film theorists and the study of individual films, the book is still hogtied by its understanding of the German film industry as a static, monolithic appendage of the Ministry of Propaganda. However, he does go on to qualify this by saying

“When critics decry Nazi cinema as an abomination, they protest too much... It is common to reduce all Nazi films to hate pamphlets, party hagiography, or mindless escapism, films with too much substance or none at all, either execrable or frivolous. In the process, the reliance of the era’s cinema on classic Hollywood conventions goes unnoticed, as does the recourse of so many productions and so much of Nazi film culture to American techniques and popular genres.”⁸

Rentschler asserts that certain elements of the totalitarian model are still relevant. On the one hand he argues that in context, the cinema of the Third Reich was largely produced with the explicit design of distracting its audience from the regime’s brutal tendencies, but on the other that the films produced under Nazi Germany are fairly typical of world cinema of the period. It may simply be that he is trying to avoid being

⁷ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 16.

⁸ Ibid, 22.

accused of holding Nazi sympathies. However it seems odd for him to address this by making it central to his argument.

Studies comparing Nazi cinema with other contemporary world cinemas, primarily Hollywood, are common among the recent work done in this field. Among these, Sabine Hake's book, *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich*, aims to treat the history of Third Reich cinema no differently than other periods of German film history. She argues that Third Reich cinema was primarily a popular cinema, sustained by "well-established generic conventions, cultural traditions, aesthetic sensibilities, social practices, and a highly-developed star system,"⁹ and that it was too contradictory to be "dismissed as escapist entertainment or vilified as mass manipulation."¹⁰ She suggests a great deal of continuity existed in the film industry before and after the establishment of National Socialist control, both in the way the film industry functioned and the films in it produced. In light of the drastic changes in organization and personnel wrought by the Nazis, most notably in the expelling of all Jews and leftists from the industry, it is hard to concur with a conclusion that so totally normalizes Nazi cinema.

A study by Jana Bruns examines the lives of three of Nazi cinema's three greatest female stars, Marika Röck, Zarah Leander and Kristina Söderbaum.¹¹ Her work represents a significant break with the view of the Third Reich's cinema as a mouthpiece for disseminating propaganda. She argues that the relationship between the state and the film industry was far more "ambivalent", and "failed to disseminate a coherent political

⁹ Sabine Hake *Popular Cinema of the Third Reich* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), viii

¹⁰ Ibid, xi

¹¹ Jana F. Bruns, *Nazi Cinema's New Women* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2009), 9.

message.”¹² “Audiences watched films whose visual and narrative organization was confusing and inconsistent, while other releases copied Hollywood and seemed utterly irrelevant to National Socialism.”¹³ Using these three actresses, she explores the role of women and the erotic in Third Reich cinema while employing a psychological model of split memory to explain the split memory many Germans had of the Nazi period.

Another study, written by Mari-Elizabeth O’Brien entitled *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment: The Politics of Entertainment in the Third Reich* (2004), also suggests the amount of control the state exerted over cinema was far less than Göbbels would have liked or historians have been lead to believe. While examining five major genres, she argues that while the content of a film could be controlled in production, once released to theaters the government could not control the public reaction.

Most of these studies have focused on various elements within either the film industry or the Ministry of Propaganda. Despite the amount of work in the field, very little work has been done concerning popular responses to the Nazified cinema. Just like in the United States, German cinema served to both inform and entertain the public. After the Nazi Party nationalized the Germany film industry in 1934, every film released by UFA (Universium Film AG, Germany’s largest pre-war studio) or other German studios served as a latent propaganda vehicle. While the most well known films of the period are explicit propaganda pieces, the best example being Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*), the vast majority of films produced in Nazi Germany were popular entertainment. From 1933 to 1945, 1,094 feature films were made in Germany, of which 914 were not political. Five hundred and twenty-three of these were musicals or

¹² Ibid, i.

¹³ Ibid, 7.

comedies, 123 were detective films and other crime dramas, and 295 were melodramas.¹⁴ These genre films tended to look stylistically similar to those made in Hollywood. The fact is that comparatively few films produced in Nazi Germany were simply state ordered propaganda. The German film industry under Nazis was still above all else, an industry, and dependant on revenue in order to survive. As such, a film still had to be popular in addition to being propagandistic.

Under the Nazi regime, every decision, no matter how ordinary took on a political aspect. The consequences of ordinary decisions in this context go beyond just the immediate results. If every choice a person made had a political meaning, then their choice of cinematic entertainment, and the resulting popularity of certain films, or types of films can be used to ascertain general reactions to the broader sociopolitical currents in National Socialist Germany. The popularity of specific films, or types of films, and the way they change over time offer a glimpse into how the citizens of Germany under the Nazis responded to the carefully crafted view of the world offered by the Nazi Party.

As box office takes soared during the war, why were people drawn to the movie theater? Were they there to escape from the cares and concerns of wartime life? Did they attend to reaffirm their flagging allegiance to the party? Or were they attending because the theaters still had heat and running water? The aim here will be to look at cinema not only as the tool of Nazism in controlling minds and guiding thoughts, but also as a tool of the historian in understanding the success of Nazism in manipulating the hearts and minds of its subjects, both willing and unwilling alike. In a simple sense, whether or not to attend the cinema was one of the few political choices a person retained. Film is first

¹⁴ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 7.

and foremost a consumer product, even in a state such as Nazi Germany. A film studio failing to make films that appeal to an audience wouldn't be in business for long.

Goebbels, as head of the German film industry, was of the opinion from the very beginning that “conveyor-belt brownshirt epics were box office poison.”¹⁵ The emergence of Nazi ideology was not a factor in drawing people to the cinema; instead they came seeking the solace in escapist fantasies that had drawn them to the cinema under Weimar and earlier, and to the theater before that. The Nazi Party polls that showed near unanimous support for Hitler present an easily contradicted picture of personal support for the Nazi regime, the same image intended to present the German people and the world with a view of the Third Reich united in synchronized goose-stepping towards a utopian future. The same rosy view of Nazism is presented in most of the films actually set in National Socialist Germany. But the fact that films about Nazism made in Germany between 1933-1945 represent less than 10% of the total output for the period paints a different picture of what Germans were watching. German taste in film had always been, and continued to be, very diverse.

Since the end of World War II and the collapse of the Nazi regime, many, if not most, of the films produced in Germany between 1933 and 1945 have remained in circulation as German cinema. Despite the circumstances of their production, these films still have an audience. This would seem to indicate either that condemnation of Nazism is not universal, or that many of the films produced while the Nazis were in power have an appeal broader than their National Socialist origins. This is in part due to the very nature of Nazi control of the film industry. While Goebbels and the Ministry of Propaganda held

¹⁵ Ibid, 9.

absolute control over what could and could not be made and shown, there was only so much he could do to influence public taste. The actual extent of his control was limited by the need to make commercially successful films. Much like the American entertainment industry that exists today, the success or failure of a film in Nazi Germany was largely at the mercy of filmgoers. If a particular film or genre proved unprofitable, the studio cut its losses and found a way to try and make the next picture more successful. The Germany film industry, despite the government control, remained an industry. It existed to provide mass entertainment that actually appealed to the masses.

In order to achieve the greatest ideological impact, a film had to be both emotionally persuasive propaganda and appealing entertainment. Dr Joseph Goebbels, in his dual role as Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda as well as the head of the film industry, had to perform a balancing act, matching the regime's needs of the moment to the German public's changing capacity to receive and absorb his messages. Between 1933 and 1945, Goebbels learned to predict and manipulate popular shifts in sentiment with increasing success. As his initial efforts proved unsuccessful he established greater and greater personal control over the industry to preserve its financial stability through tighter control. In turning an entire industry into what amounted to a directly administrated entity under the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP), as David Welch said, "...Goebbels justified the war, extolled the invincibility of German military might, romanticized its heroes, and, as Germany's military position became more desperate, mythologized the nation's *Götterdämmerung*." ¹⁶

¹⁶ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 160.

The cinema of Nazi Germany, in addition to largely being the product of Nazi ideology, was also largely dependant upon the tastes and interests of the German filgoing public. Instead of looking at films as documents of Nazism, as has been already done, this paper will look at them both in terms of public opinion, and in the broader context of the state of the Nazi regime. While using the gross profit of a film as an indicator of its popularity presents a number of inherent difficulties, it does provide a previously unexplored view of public sentiment under the Nazi regime. It reveals that the German public had a healthy appetite for dramatic films, particularly during the early war years, and it reveals their susceptibility to propaganda. While other factors must be considered, the fact that many of the highest grossing films were state-sponsored propaganda epics suggests both the willingness of the film going public accept a Nazi view of the world and the degree of success Goebbels had tailoring his messages to the taste of the masses.

Goebbels and Propaganda

The single most important figure in cinema during the Third Reich is undeniably Goebbels. A diminutive man with a clubfoot and leg brace, Goebbels was an early adherent of the Nazi Party, who quickly rose to power within the movement. In taking charge of the Nazi state's public relations as the Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, Goebbels was responsible for every form of mass media. In this capacity he took on the seemingly daunting task of inculcating the masses with Nazi ideology.

Goebbels had a major advantage in the form of the initial support, which had swept Hitler into the Chancellorship; many Germans were already sympathetic to the

Nazi Party, and the prejudices underlying Nazi ideology had a long German history. Instead of trying to impose new ideas, he simply had to excite themes such as nationalism, patriotism, and others that had long resonated with Germans. The sense of belonging to a greater German community was a powerful uniting force; so were the “racial enemies” of Germany whom Goebbels sought to direct the nation against.

Building on existing sentiments, it was easy for Goebbels to achieve a connection with the public on the basis of their “Germanness.” As he explained in his diary, “In the long run basic results in influencing the public will be achieved only by the man who is able to reduce problems to the most simple terms and who has the courage to keep forever repeating them in this simplified form...”¹⁷ By communicating ideas in the simplest, most emotional form, and repeating them constantly on all available mediums, Goebbels felt he was in a prime position to influence public opinion.

Under Goebbels, what we would today term as news, entertainment and propaganda became increasingly hard to distinguish from one another. He was of the opinion that overt propaganda had far less persuasive power than if it was presented in an artistic or dramatic context, such as a film. As such the viewer was much less aware that they were the subjects of manipulation. Goebbels was also a tremendous film enthusiast, and often highly concerned with the artistic merits of the films Germany produced.¹⁸ His personal goal was to produce a German equivalent to Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925),¹⁹ of which he said:

¹⁷ Louis P. Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*. (Garden City, Doubleday, 1948), 22.

¹⁸ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 12.

¹⁹ Stephen Brockman, *A Critical History of the German Cinema*, (Rochester: Camden House, 2010), 135.

“This is a marvelous film without equal in the cinema. The reason is its power of conviction. Anyone who had no political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing the film. It shows very clearly that a work of art can be tendentious and even the worst kind of ideas can be propagated, if this is done through the medium of an outstanding work of art.”²⁰

Goebbels took advantage of all the available mediums to spread Nazi ideology. In addition to feature films he oversaw the print media, the radio, and the production of newsreels, all of which played a role in his propaganda strategy.

One of Goebbel’s earliest experiences with the party had been running a newspaper called *The Attack (Der Angriff)* in Berlin during 1926.²¹ In portraying events as the Nazis saw them, he established the technique of reporting ideology as news that German newspapers were to follow after he took control of the press. While newspapers could report on something within a day of it happening, they were quickly outstripped by the radio. Perhaps the quickest means of dispersing news and propaganda, “Radio was a powerful tool in the Nazi campaign to coordinate all cultural activities and the flow of information. Soon after his appointment as propaganda minister, Goebbels stressed the value of radio in disseminating ideas and declared it ‘the most modern and most important instrument for influencing the masses.’”²² The medium allowed the rapid, one-way transmission of news and ideological content, along with diversionary entertainment. Goebbels insisted on the manufacture of cheap, affordable radio receiver sets; by 1936, half of all German households owned a radio. While German state radio was centralized

²⁰ From Goebbels’ speech to the *Filmwelt* on March 28, 1933, as quoted in Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 12.

²¹ Randall Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 32

²² O’Brien, *Nazi Cinema as Enchantment: The Politics of Entertainment in the Third Reich*, 122.

and therefore could be easily controlled, radio sets could also be used to listen to banned foreign broadcasts, an act punishable by imprisonment or even death.²³

Despite the speed with which they could deliver news and ideology, neither the radio nor the newspaper could match the visual mediums of the newsreel and the feature film in terms of effectiveness and emotional impact. Newsreels were produced and released on a regular basis, providing a visual summary of recent events with a Nazi ideological slant. Usually shown before a feature film, the newsreel was often more ideologically charged than the film it preceded.

Beginning with the Nazi's rise to power in 1933, Goebbels proceeded to bring the entire German film industry under his personal control.²⁴ In doing so he faced a delicate proposition. If he moved too quickly, he risked alienating established studio heads and producers who possessed enormous clout in the industry and faced financial ruin in the event of a state takeover. On the other hand, if he moved too slowly he left the industry open to the influence of his rivals, most notably Gregor Strasser, another Nazi leader in Berlin, but generally the more radical elements in the party who came to pose a threat to Hitler's leadership in the early 1930s. A number of these were prominent members of the *Sturmabteilung* (Storm Troopers, or SA), the brown shirt thugs whose violent street war against the Communists had significantly aided the rise of the party. Their interest in the film industry arose primarily from a desire to see their own exploits dramatized on celluloid.²⁵ Their interference was especially problematic for Goebbels, who in addition to his efforts to control the production of propaganda, had been tasked by Hitler with

²³ Ibid, 121-23

²⁴ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 8.

²⁵ Ibid, 74.

gaining control of the more rebellious elements of the party. Goebbels ultimately prevailed by maintaining his loyalty to the Fuehrer: when Hitler eliminated his rivals on the Night of the Long Knives in 1934, he eliminated Goebbels' rivals too.

Goebbel's control of the film industry was implemented through dual party and state apparatuses, similar to many other institutions in Nazi Germany.²⁶ For example the state controlled *Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces) existed as a separate organization from the party run SA and SS, despite their overlapping spheres of influence and share membership.²⁷ The controlling bodies for the film industry were the party's Reich Culture Chamber, (*Reichkulturkammer*, RKK) and the state's Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. While each body operated independent of the other and controlled a different aspect of the industry, they were both answered directly to Goebbels.

The Nazi party apparatus, the film chamber of the Reich Culture Chamber (*Reichsfilmkammer*, RFK) was responsible for policing film industry personnel. In May of 1933, the Nazis enacted a ban on all trade unions, including the film union DACHO (*Dach-Organisation der Filmschaffenden Deutschlands e.V.*, Controlling Body of the Film Workers of Germany.) In order to continue working in the film industry in any capacity, all employees had to join the RFK. In order to join one had to prove Aryan ancestry.²⁸ The intention and effect of this policy was to exclude Jews and anyone else considered to be racially impure from involvement in the film industry.

²⁶ Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The German Cinema*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 69.

²⁷ George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939-1945*, (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1984.), 18

²⁸ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 9-10.

The removal of persons of Jewish descent dealt the German film industry a severe blow. They represented a sizable portion of the actors, directors, and screenwriters, and were directly responsible for many of the renowned films made during the Weimar period, such as Fritz Lang, director of *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931).²⁹ However, as it was deemed necessary by Nazi ideology, the removal of Jews (*Entjudung*) from all aspects of the film industry was undertaken within months of Hitler assuming the Chancellorship, and the result in many areas including the film industry was a large drop in the number of skilled laborers. Despite the deleterious effects of these policies, the major studios retained enough of a talent pool eligible to join the RFA so as to allow them to remain in business.³⁰

While the party controlled who could work for the film industry, the state controlled the actual production of films, which was done under the auspices of the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP), which assumed responsibility for funding all film production in Germany. Initially, Goebbels pursued a simple yet effective policy to earn the loyalty of film producers and studio executives: he offered them guaranteed access to credit.³¹ In exchange for guaranteed funding, they were simply required to produce films they that met Goebbel's stringent ideological requirements.

To meet these obligations, the Film Credit Bank (*Filmkreditbank*) was established in June of 1933 to provide funding for film production in Germany. Under Goebbels, it was the only source of credit available to film studios. It was intended to be a low profit

²⁹ Brockman, *A Critical History of the German Cinema*, 127.

³⁰ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 12.

³¹ Ibid, 25.

venture, for the sole purpose of consolidating financial control over the film industry. A producer would be required to raise enough funds to cover 30% of the production costs, and the bank would put up the rest. The bank would then own the rights to the finished film, until the film earned back the production costs, at which point the studio was entitled to the profits. While initially conceived of to fund all film production in Germany, in practice the FKB dealt primarily with the larger studios that could guarantee wider distribution. By 1936, the FKB was funding 73% of feature films produced in Germany (the remainder were privately financed.) These policies effectively limited the opportunities smaller studios had to secure financial aid for new projects, and made it more difficult to profit from any films they were able to produce. This was typical of Goebbels' attitude towards the film industry, favoring larger entities he could control with less effort over smaller, more diverse operations that were more easily able to slip around the censorship rules he imposed. Overall, the Reich Credit Bank greatly expanded the Nazi monopoly over the industry.³²

Any film financed by the RKB, and therefore any film produced in Nazi Germany, was required to pass stringent ideological censorship. This was not only to weed out films that contained themes antithetical to Nazism, but also to ensure that any film that passed censorship was presented in the best and most timely, and therefore most profitable, fashion possible, given Goebbels' changing propaganda goals. Censorship was practiced at three phases during production. First, the filmmaker submitted a treatment or scenario of the film so the general themes could be analyzed. If the treatment passed muster, a full script would be submitted for approval. If the script was found to be

³² Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 10.

ideologically correct, the project would be funded and production could commence. In many cases Goebbels would oversee the process personally, especially for films produced at the state's request. After a film was shot and edited, it was submitted for a censorship a third time. Upon passing for the final time, a film would be given final permission for distribution and exhibition. However, funding and permission to continue could be revoked at any stage in the process, and for any reason.³³ While this created a great deal of uncertainty for producers, ultimately most films were passed without major alterations. In large part this was thanks to the studio's willingness to accommodate Goebbels. The racial requirements for employment in the film industry had effectively weeded out most of the filmmakers and who might have voiced objections, and those who remained were largely willing to engage in self-censorship. Given the choice between artistic limitations and professional excommunication, most chose to keep their jobs and accept Goebbels' promise of guaranteed funding for approved projects.³⁴

Goebbels was able to bring the film industry under his personal oversight with relative ease. His struggle to limit the influence exerted by other members of the Party was much more protracted.³⁵ The Nazi Party had a history of filming and distributing propaganda in regional, decentralized fashion. In 1933 and early 1934 this tradition continued with a series of films commissioned by and about the SA and Hitler Youth, later dubbed the Martyr Trilogy. Effectively produced outside Goebbels' purview, the studios behind these films produced them as an overture to the new Nazi government,

³³ Ibid, 14.

³⁴ Brockman, *A Critical History of the German Cinema*, 134.

³⁵ Ibid, 135.

and promptly drew Goebbels ire.³⁶ Using his powers as the Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels' attempts at banning these films were only foiled by the film studio's concerns that they would be unable to recoup their investments if the films could not be shown. While he ultimately relented, the situation provides a clear example of exactly why Goebbels felt the need for a law to solidify his power within the party while more explicitly stating his position to the film community. On the one hand, he needed to reassure the industry that he would not ban films in an arbitrary fashion. On the other, he had to show his rivals he would tolerate no interference (excepting, of course, the wishes of his superiors, primarily Hitler.)

Hitlerjunge Quex

Hitlerjunge Quex (1933) is a retelling of the death of Herbert Norkus, a Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend* or HJ) killed by the Communists in 1932.³⁷ Considered the second installment in the Nazi "Martyr Trilogy" of films about young Nazis who sacrifice their lives for cause, released in 1933-1934. The film's focus is on the HJ instead of the SA like the other two points of the trilogy--*SA-Mann Brand* (1933)³⁸ and *Hans Westmar* (1934)³⁹--do. Of the three films, *Hitlerjunge Quex* received the best official reception. In the months after the Nazis took power in January 1933, the German film industry was unsure how the new government would enforce regulations or what sort of films it wished to see produced. In the 1920s, the Nazi Party produced its own film propaganda at the city- and regional level, with individual *Gauleiters* (regional leader) overseeing the

³⁶ Tegel, *Nazis and Cinema*, 72-3.

³⁷ *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*). Directed by Hans Steinhoff, Berlin: Universum Film Ag, 1933.

³⁸ *SA-Mann Brand*. 1933. Directed by Franz Seitz. Munich: Bavaria Filmkunst.

³⁹ *Hans Westmar*. 1934. Directed by Franz Wenzler. Berlin: Tobis Filmkunst.

production of their own documentaries and newsreels.⁴⁰ There was a great deal of confusion as to who would assume control of the industry. Out of the fractious chaos, emerged one Dr Joseph Goebbels, the *Gauleiter* of Berlin. Using his personal access to Hitler, he was able to establish the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda with himself as its minister on March 13, 1933, within months of the Nazi ascension to power. The position allowed him to begin consolidating his control over the film industry. The film industry, like so many other commercial interests in Germany, generally acquiesced to the Nazi's wishes. In fact, the biggest obstacle Goebbels faced in his drive for complete control over German culture and media was not resistance from filmmakers, but was from other party members with competing agendas. The leaders of organizations such as the SA were keen to see their exploits splashed across the big screen. *SA-Mann Brand* was a project undertaken by a smaller production company, Bavaria Film,⁴¹ while *Hans Westmar* was produced under the patronage of high-ranking members of the SA.⁴² However by the time the two came were ready for release, Goebbels was already cementing his position as Propaganda Minister. Viewing the SA films as a direct challenge to his authority, he promptly had them banned. Officially, he criticized them as being poor works of art, produced by incompetent directors and crews. While he was in fact concerned about the artistic quality of the films Germany was producing, the real reasons for his opposition were much more political. Goebbels sought every means available to solidify his position as head of the German film community. Hindering his opponents, while petty, served as a successful stalling tactic,

⁴⁰ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid 41.

⁴² Ibid 62.

especially in light of the deteriorating situation between Hitler and the leadership of the SA. By opposing films about the *Kampfzeit* (time of struggle, loosely 1919-33) and the SA Storm Troopers, he expanded not only his growing control of the film industry, but also his favor with Hitler immediately following the purge of the SA leadership during the Night of the Long Knives in early July, 1934. Ultimately, all three films were released and awarded prizes (*Predikäte*). While all three were financially successful, Goebbels allowed no further films about the SA, and just to be safe, he refused to produce films about any other Nazi organization.⁴³

From the very first scene, *Hitlerjunge Quex* establishes the two forces vying for the soul of Germany: Nazism and Communism, two rival forces trying win the hearts and minds of Germans for diametrically different purposes. The film is quick to establish that these rivals oppose each other not only on the political spectrum, but also in a moral sense: Nazism represents order and the assured survival of Germany, while Communism represents anarchy, revolution and the complete abandonment of German values.⁴⁴ The film further cements this duality on a subconscious level, always presenting the Nazis in orderly rows and columns, while the communists are invariably a disorderly mob.

In the central conflict of the film, Heine Völker is drawn as an analogy to Germany, over whose soul the forces of good and evil wage battle. Heine, torn between his communist, alcoholic father and the Nazis he yearns to march alongside, is strictly the honorable sort and greatly admired by both sides. Both Communists and Nazis want to win him over, but go about it in very different ways. The Communists try a number of

⁴³ Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema*, 73.

⁴⁴ During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Nazis and Communists engaged in violent street battles throughout Germany. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 16.

unsuccessful methods, offering Heine bribes, pressuring his father to enroll him in the communist youth group, and finally threatening his life if he continues to support the Nazis. The Nazis, whom Heine implicitly supports since his first encounter with them, are presented as forthright, upstanding citizens with nation's best interests at heart. Heine seeks out members of the Hitler Youth troop he encountered previously, who are initially suspicious of him, though some members express a desire to let him join. After Heine earns their trust, they joyfully accept them as one their own, as he repeatedly proves his worth to the Hitler Youth.

In his role as a cinematic proxy for Germany, Heine is shown as upstanding and righteous amongst all others. Even the Communists show respect for his loyalty. But even as they seek to corrupt into their own cause they are too late; his loyalty has always leaned towards the Nazis, despite sympathy for the Internationale inherited from his father. To pursue the analogy to its fullest extent, Germany, the greatest country among nations, finds itself torn between the Nazis and the Communists, and in choosing the former earns the enmity of the latter. In siding with the Nazis, Germany has found itself in the company of those who understand his struggles and aspirations. But just as Germany finds himself on the verge of a Nazi victory, the communists stab it- and Heine- in the back in the dark of night. As Heine dies in the arms of his comrades, he ascends to be reborn in spirit- like Germany, leading his people towards the age of National Socialism and the ascendance of the Führer.



Figure 1: Heine Völker dies in the arms of his comrades, prophesizing the rise of the Führer. Source: *Hitlerjunge Quex*, dir. Franz Seitz.

In the same way Heine represents Germany, the film's plot is a retelling of the events of the Great War (or World War I), with the Nazis cast as the natural successors to the Second Reich, and Hitler to the Kaiser. Germany and its noble leaders, on the verge of victory, were stabbed in the back by Communists, Jews and other foreigners who conspired to bring about Germany's defeat through cowardly, surreptitious measures.⁴⁵

Hitlerjunge Quex provides a useful commentary on Nazi theories regarding ideology. Communists such as Heine's father or the youth leader Stoppel are portrayed not as inflexible ideologues, but as thinking, feeling, people capable of being swayed by

⁴⁵ Richard Bessel, *Nazism and War*, (New York: Random House Digital, 2006), 8.

reason. Heine's father is a World War I veteran who got shot, and turned to alcohol and communism to alleviate both the pain in his leg and the pain of Germany's loss. But the film makes it clear at this early stage in Nazi rule that simply being a Communist and a member of the Internationale doesn't mean he is beyond redemption. As his son is drawn to the Hitler Youth, he demonstrates increasing sympathy for the Nazi Party, allowing his son to join and even voicing National Socialist sentiments to his friend Stoppel. Stoppel, the leader of a communist youth group, is a stronger adherent to communism than Herr Völker. He initiates Heine into the Internationale, but immediately finds him difficult to control. While he resents the trouble caused by Heine's headstrong ways, he admires the boy's courage and potential. As Heine causes further trouble for the communists, Stoppel repeatedly threatens to kill him but finds himself unable to carry out the threat. His loyalty shifts away from the Internationale towards Heine, as he lies to his fellow Communists to protect the boy. But before he can progress from sympathy for Heine to support for the Nazis, Heine is murdered. While Stoppel never finds redemption during the film, he poses a degree of humanity rare for a communist character. Later villains are drawn much more one-dimensionally, bent solely on the defeat and destruction of the sympathetic Aryan characters.

The racial treatment of characters is very different from later films. Many later films, notable virulently anti-Semitic propaganda films such as *Der Ewige Jude* (1940) and *Jud Süß* (1940) portrayed the Jewish villains as caricatures, complete with hooked noses, swarthy complexions, and full beards. Alternately they appeared as Marxist intellectuals who had shed the obvious trappings of their "race" to better infiltrate and

undermine society.⁴⁶ However, in 1933 the image of the Jew isn't nearly as terrifying. The sole Jewish character in *Hitlerjunge Quex*, Heine's boss Herr Kowalski, is depicted as a miser whose sole interest is money, and who believes haggling over prices is work. He also buys most of the Völker's furniture after the death of Frau Völker, paying Herr Volker a pittance for most of his possessions. However his obviously non-German name and his obsession with money, Herr Kowalski possesses no "Jewish" characteristics, and seems to bear stronger resemblance to Heinrich Himmler than to later Nazi incarnations of the villainous Jew.⁴⁷ The implication is that Jews are less of an immediate threat to Germany than the communists.

The uncertainty surrounding Goebbels' policies had a disruptive effect on the film industry. Financing a production was a risky endeavor when the film could be cancelled at any time based upon Goebbels' whim. The business of film production could not be continued as usual under the conditions that existed from mid-1933 until early 1934. Simply offering easy, though conditional access to credit was not enough to entice filmmakers to accept Goebbels' terms when those terms were nebulously defined. Unable to justify new ventures, German film studios were largely shut down in early 1934, awaiting passage of new film legislation. The Reich Cinema Law, enacted in April 1934, clarified Goebbels position and made clearer the conditions under which a film would receive approval, while simultaneously granting Goebbels the freedom act with omnipotence as he saw fit.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 241.

⁴⁷ Tegel, *Nazis and the Cinema*, 73.

⁴⁸ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 73.

In his drive to assert complete control over the film industry, Goebbels seems to have harbored a particular dislike for films featuring the various party organs of the NSDAP. This proved true not only of early fiction films like those comprising the martyr trilogy, but also but also later films like *Victory in the West* (*Sieg im Westen*, 1941) a documentary produced by the German army, the *Wehrmacht*. This was primarily due to the fact that any party organization represented in a film inevitably demanded more input than Goebbels was willing to allow.⁴⁹

Passed on February 16, 1934, the Reich Cinema Law established the basic policy upon which Goebbels planned to encourage the production of a National Socialist cinema. This employed a carrot and stick approach: “good” films, which displayed National Socialist tendencies and fit within Goebbels’ broader propaganda goals, would be awarded any number of prizes, or marks of distinction. For each one received, the tax on box office receipts was reduced by a specific amount. On the other hand, the law also increased the number of reasons for which a film could be barred from distribution. All scripts were to be thoroughly examined before a production was approved; failing to meet Goebbels’ stringent ideological requirements was grounds for immediate suspension of the project.⁵⁰ The new law cemented RMVP control over the film industry, and Goebbels absolute authority to control film production. While in theory the law specified the reasons for which a film could be banned, in practice Goebbels always had absolute authority to do as he pleased.

⁴⁹ Ibid 74.

⁵⁰ Ibid 13-16.

Many producers and other film industry executives were very anxious regarding the viability of future productions in the period leading up to the passage of the law.⁵¹ Goebbels' appeared to be censoring films in an arbitrary and mercurial fashion, and no one knew who would be the next target of his ire. Their perception of Goebbels aside, he actually showed a degree of restraint in that he allowed most films that passed scrutiny during production to go on and premiere and then into general release. His goal was to maintain the profitability, and thereby the loyalty, of the industry. At the same time, he conducted censorship on the basis of ideology and took swift action against any film failing to pass muster. While his intentions may have initially been misunderstood, Goebbels sought films that expressed what he deemed as the proper National Socialist tendencies at the proper times.

Before the Nazi ascension, foreign film rental fees made up a significant percentage of box office receipts. However after 1933 foreign income dropped off alarmingly, prompting a great deal of concern. Financial reports dating from this period indicate this drop was expected to be temporary. Welch theorizes Goebbels delayed the complete nationalization of the film industry in part to boost export value of films with the continued perception that German film was still an independent artistic and commercial endeavor. If this were indeed the case, Goebbels would have hoped to maintain German's reputation as the second largest and respected film industry in the world, behind only the United States. If he had been successful, the result would have been increased foreign revenue to fund German rearmament.⁵² This explanation also provides another possible reason for the abrupt end of non-documentary feature films

⁵¹ Ibid 73.

⁵² Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 23.

explicitly glorifying the Nazi party: so-called jackboot cinema. While achieving a limited resonance in Nazi Germany, such cinema was nowhere near as popular in countries governed by non-fascist regimes. Ultimately, however, the lack of foreign interest in German films led to an increased need for domestic profits, and contributed to the film industry's continuing financial instability. By the latter half of the 1930s, Goebbels was forced to take action again, further nationalizing the film industry, spurred by concerns over falling box office receipts and rising production costs.

1936-1939

In 1936 UFA and Tobis, the two largest German studios, were consolidated into a single entity called Katio Treuhand GmbH.⁵³ Both companies were secretly and indirectly state controlled (*staatsmittelbar*). Publicly, each still behaved as an independent corporation, when in reality both companies' boards were controlled by the state. Additionally, assets were taken from each and combined into a new production company called Terrakunst GmbH. Along with the studios, the system for financing films was reorganized as Film Finanz GmbH, which took on all the functions of the older Reich Kredit Bank. By 1939 nearly every German film studio, as well as those in Austria and Czechoslovakia were indirectly controlled by the State. By 1941 these companies were responsible for 70% of all feature film production in the greater German Reich.⁵⁴

1938 Goebbels established the German Film Academy (*Deutsche Filmakademie*) to train new actors, directors, writers and technicians.⁵⁵ It served to feed new employees into the film industry, and was perhaps a response to the large numbers of skilled

⁵³ Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 277.

⁵⁴ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid

technicians who fled to other countries, particularly to the United States. However it was to become increasingly important several years later, as the war effort required larger and larger numbers of soldiers, and the resulting draft lead to a serious shortage of available personell.

The reorganization of the film industry, despite the increased control it gave Goebbels, was not primarily about consolidating his power. Goebbels was already the unrivaled leader of the film industry, and had been since 1934. Internal and external interference was no longer a major concern. So it seems the single greatest reason for increased state intervention was concern over rising production costs, coupled with falling box office sales. Goebbels personal motivations aside, it isn't a coincidence that the methods he used to restore the industry to profitability also served to greatly expanded his control over it. His policies focused on stabilizing the larger studios, intervening to control costs in the same fashion as he already controlled content. But by focusing exclusively on the larger studios, he ignored the similar problems faced by smaller production companies. The net result was the smaller companies were forced to shut down, while the remaining, larger studios found themselves even further under state control.⁵⁶

Because of their often lengthy production times, Goebbels felt films were best suited to explaining decisions and policy already in place. He hoped to curry the emotional support of the masses for controversial Nazi programs. One of the most notable examples of this, *Ich klage an* (*I Accuse*, 1941)⁵⁷ portrayed the euthanasia

⁵⁶ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 24.

⁵⁷ Despite the fact that *Ich Klage an* was released in 1941, later than the period in question, it is still the seminal example of this policy, in large part because it was

campaign as the plight of a husband who wants to spare his terminally ill wife a slow death. The film makes a personal appeal to the audience, depicting euthanasia as merciful act to prevent unnecessary suffering. It was entirely irrelevant to Goebbels that the film ignored the reality of the T4 program, where people were killed based on a doctor's recommendations, without their own or their families consent. The film was to raise support for the program, not awareness. Released after the T4 program had gained public notoriety, *Ich Klage an* was intended to "explain" the policy after the fact, or at least make it seem emotionally justifiable.

The War 1939-1942

With the outbreak of war, Goebbels began to commission larger, more expensive epics with the specific intent of improving the artistic output of the German film industry, thereby hoping to improve box office performance.⁵⁸ He also took further steps to nationalize the film industry, consolidating the Kautio Treuhand trust into a single new studio that shared the name UFA with the earlier studio, and called UFI to distinguish it. The entire process of nationalization had been simply left out of the news to keep it secret from the public, and the new, single organization maintained the same public faces so as to keep even the studio's employees unaware of the state's new role as owner of the film industry.⁵⁹ After 1942, the organization and structure of the industry remained largely unchanged until the end of the war. While the nationalization made it easier for the state

unsuccessful in explaining away the T4 program, thereby revealing the limits of this particular propaganda strategy. Other policies explained in this manner included Germany's violations of the Treaty of Versailles, such as rearmament and the occupation of the Rhineland.

⁵⁸ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 159.

⁵⁹ Ibid 27-9.

to keep tighter control over production costs, state-sponsored films continued to receive increasingly large budgets, which they regularly overran.

The war brought about a shift in Goebbels' cinematic propaganda, away from merely encouraging support for Nazi policy towards agitational stumping for the war effort; however the public's taste in films remained largely unchanged.⁶⁰ While Goebbels encouraged films vilifying the enemy, Germans demonstrated a continued preference for dramas, not propaganda films. However Goebbels was at least partially successful, in that a fair number of these films combined dramatic and ideological elements. The popular films from the early war years (by gross profit) reveal that although Germans' film preferences remained consistent, they were also receptive to Goebbels' propaganda efforts.

In considering the twenty most popular films made between 1938 and 1940 period (the five most popular from each year,) at least half can be characterized as dramas of one type or another, mostly either historical or melodramas.⁶¹ The term drama is used in a very general sense to describe a very diverse range of films, including some that could also be characterized as romantic films, period pieces, biographical films, and blatant propaganda. Many films defy simple generic categories, and share the conventions of two or three different categories.

One of the most prominent trends is the sudden drop in popularity of adventure films after 1938, which disappear in 1939, followed by the rise in popularity of historical

⁶⁰ Report on Film Industry Finances, file *R2/4829-30*, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Germany.

⁶¹ The files I was able to order from the German Archive in Koblenz only included detailed data on the years 1938-1941. While this paper would certainly benefit from a broader discussion based on the data for additional years, I have done as much as I can with the material available.

drama and films set in a contemporary Germany in 1940 and 1941.⁶² This would seem indicative of a loss of interest in fictional tales of heroism at a time when Germany stood poised to conquer Europe. Stories of adventure and courage under fire were no longer merely products of the imagination. The film going public was more interested in seeing films about current events, and responded very positively to Goebbels' policy of capitalizing on military victories to encourage patriotism and support for the war effort.

As important as historical dramas were films about current events, most notably about the 'evil' British, with whom tensions were rising in the period leading up to the outbreak of war. During the period when Britain and Germany maintained an uneasy state of peace, a popular film such as *Kautschuk (India Rubber)*, 1938 portrayed the British in a positive light. One of the last Nazi adventure films, *India Rubber* features a young Englishman who risks everything to break the Brazilian monopoly on natural rubber.⁶³

However, films about the British were not necessarily popular with the German film viewing public. In the year war broke out, 1939, no films featuring the British appeared in the top five for box office receipts. However in 1940, after the outbreak of war, the tone of the films changed entirely. Films with British heroes were replaced with films portraying the British callous, cruel and power hungry. The popular film *Das Herz der Königen (Heart of the Queen)*, 1940 portrayed the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots and her execution at the hands of English tyrants.⁶⁴ *Ohm Krüger (Uncle Krüger)*, 1941)

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ *Kautschuk (India Rubber)*. 1938. Directed by Eduard von Borsody. Berlin: Universum Film Ag.

⁶⁴ *Das Herz der Königen (Heart of the Queen)*. 1940. Directed by Carl Froelich. Berlin: Universum Film Ag.

dramatizes the Boer War, portraying the British as uncaring, greedy capitalists who conspire to seize South Africa from the gentle Dutch and German colonists already living there.⁶⁵ The popularity of these films suggests a generally hostile attitude towards the British, and a German public willing to believe wartime propaganda vilifying their adversary.

Beyond demonizing the British enemy, beginning in 1941, documentaries about the German armed forces also became popular.⁶⁶ The rapid string of victories in Poland, the Low Countries (Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg,) Denmark, Norway and France during the first two years of the war were easily adapted into exciting films about the war effort. *Sieg im Westen (Victory in the West, 1941)* was a documentary film about the Army's victory in France.⁶⁷ Produced entirely under the auspices of the Army, it was intended to showcase the strength of the German military and the general superiority of German weapons, which are required because Germany is beset by enemies on all sides. The film gave Hitler and the Nazi Party very little credit for the victory, and thereby earned Goebbels' ire.⁶⁸ Similarly, *U-Boote westwärts (Submarines Westward, 1941)* featured the lives of real U-boat crews, as they prepared to put out to sea and engaged the British in daring naval battles.⁶⁹ It was shot on location in the North Atlantic. Unlike *Victory in the West*, it was produced by UFA, and therefore had Goebbels' approval before

⁶⁵ *Ohm Krüger (Uncle Krüger)*. 1941. Directed by Hans Steinhoff. Berlin: Tobis Filmkunst.

⁶⁶ BA R2/4829-30

⁶⁷ *Sieg im Westen (Victory in the West)*. 1941. Directed by Svend Noldan. Berlin: Universum Film AG.

⁶⁸ Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema*, (New York: Macmillan), 1974, 57.

⁶⁹ *U-Boote westwärts (Submarines Westward)*. 1941. Directed by Gunther Rittau. Berlin: Universum Film Ag.

release.⁷⁰ The popular success of these films illustrates the public's interest in the armed forces, and the success of the war effort.

In 1940, the second most popular film in Germany was *Jud Süß*, a virulently anti-Semitic propaganda.⁷¹ Directed by Veit Harlan, it sought to demonstrate how Jews were dangerous to society, both in terms of what they would do to governments and economies, and the sexual threat they posed to Aryan women. This and other anti-Semitic films were released in 1939 and 1940, coinciding with the mass deportation of German Jews to the east. The intent was entirely to justify the actions taken against Jews, and of course to draw historical parallels demonstrating the necessity of the measures.⁷²

The immediate implication of the film's popularity would seem to be that on the whole, Germans believed what the government was saying about Jews, and supported their removal from society. While the exact extent to which this was true is unlikely to ever be discerned, another possibility lies with the high production value of films like *Jud Süß*. And this union of ideological message and high production value was not accidental. As one of Goebbels' favorite directors, Harlan was assigned projects considered of high value to the state. His films were given unrestricted access to funding and resources, and are consequently among the most lavish and expensive films produced during the Third Reich, in addition to being some of the most ideological.⁷³ It is therefore necessary to consider that people who went to see a film like *Jud Süß* were not just there to see an anti-Semitic film, but instead a "good" film, given Harlan's reputation.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Paterson, *Second U-Boat Flotilla*, (Yorkshire: Leo Cooper, 2003), 51.

⁷¹ *Jud Süß*. (*Jew Süß*, 1940.) Directed by Veit Harlan. Berlin: Terrakunst GmbH.

⁷² Cinzia Romani, *Tainted Goddesses: Female Film Stars of the Third Reich* (New York: Sarpedon, 1992), p 89

⁷³ Bruns, *Nazi Cinema's New Women*, 216.

However the film's readily apparent subject matter also suggests that a potential viewer would choose to see this film based on existing prejudices, which stood only to be reinforced in viewing it.

Year of Release	Title	GBO	Studio	Genre
1938	Pour le Merite	3800	UFA	Drama/Propaganda
1938	Der Blaufuchs	2400	UFA	Melodrama
1938	-	2025	Terra	-
1938	Sergeant Berry	1850	Tobis	Western/Adventure
1938	Kautschuk	1800	UFA	Adventure
	Es War eine rauschende			
1939	Ballnacht	4600	UFA	Melodrama
1939	Robert Koch	4500	Tobis	Drama/Biogprahy
1939	Opernball	3900	Terra	Comedy
1939	-	3800	Terra	-
1939	Der ewige Quell	3500	Bavaria	Drama
1940	Wunschkonzert	7200	UFA	Melodrama/Propaganda
1940	Jud Süß	6200	Terra	Drama/Propaganda
1940	Bismark	4400	Tobis	Historical Drama
1940	Herz der Königen	4000	UFA	Historical Drama
1940	Die Geierwally	3800	Tobis	Melodrama
1941	Ohm Krüger	5500	Tobis	Historical Drama
1941	...reitet für Deutschland	5000	UFA	Drama/Propaganda
1941	Seig im Westen	4500	UFA	Documentary/Propaganda
1941	Der Weg ins Freie	4500	UFA	Melodrama
1941	U-boats westwärts	4000	UFA	Documentary/Propaganda

Table 1: The Five Most Popular Films in Germany, 1938-1941⁷⁴

While the most popular type of film from this period was definitively dramas, the outbreak of war seems to have brought about an interest in Historical dramas, which tended to dramatize the lives of great geniuses or visionaries, depicting their tenacity and resolve in pursuing their personal vision. Examples include *Robert Koch* (1939,)

⁷⁴ The blank film titles were illegible in the original microfiche. They are left blank so as not to bias the conclusions with less popular films, as knowing the title, genre and plot summary could only serve to increase the standing of the groups of which they may be part. BA R2/4829-30.

depicting the famous doctor's career as a crusade against death. Dr Koch is forced to overcome the reactionary tendencies of lesser minds in order to successfully find a cure for tuberculosis.⁷⁵ It could be described as demonstrating National socialist tendencies and ideology: the hero is a man of destiny who must labor to save the masses from themselves. *It was a Roaring Ball Night* (*Es war eine Rauschende Ballnacht*, 1939) was a popular melodrama about the Russian composer Tchaikovsky's struggle to write his master opus. It was released in November of 1939, shortly after the signing of the Molotov Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939,⁷⁶ however only circumstantial evidence supports a connection between the historic agreement with Russia and a film about a notable Russian figure. While it is a film about a historical figure, it also features a melodramatic plot about a fictional and tragically brief romance between the composer and a young ballerina who is his only admirer, cut short by Tchaikovsky's death.⁷⁷ This is somewhat ironic in light of the fact that in reality the composer was gay.⁷⁸

If in the period 1938-1939, films about the British were not very popular and soft in their criticism, more virulent anti-British propaganda became popular after the war broke out. This cannot be wholly attributed to the changing interests of the German public, as virtually no anti-British films were released until *after* Britain and Germany became belligerents. A film could take anywhere between several months and a year

⁷⁵ *Robert Koch, der Bekämpfer des Todes* (*Robert Koch, Fighter of Death.*) 1939. Directed by Hans Steinhoff. Berlin: Tobis Filmkunst.

⁷⁶ The Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact was signed on August 23, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939.

⁷⁷ *Es war eine rauschende Ballnacht* (*It was a Roaring Ball Night.*) 1939. Directed by Carl Froelich. Berlin: Universum Film Ag.

⁷⁸ Wayne R. Dynes, *History of homosexuality in Europe and America*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 169.

from the time it was approved until the time it was released. State ordered films typically took the longest, because they often involved a considerable amount of re-shooting to ensure the proper ideological message. This is characteristic example of Goebbels' approach to film propaganda: after seizing upon German victories to build nationalistic fervor using more prompt forms of propaganda, feature films which alternately demonized and ridiculed the British continued to shill for the German war effort. Anti-British propaganda seems to have been well received by the German public; feature films such as *Heart of the Queen (Herz der Königen)* portrayed the British as cruel tyrants, uncaring capitalists in *Titanic* or heartless imperialists in *Uncle Krüger (Ohm Krüger, 1941)* proved popular beginning in 1940. In keeping with Goebbels' philosophies of using art to deliver propaganda, none of these films concerned the ongoing war effort against the British. Instead they portrayed the British as a people devoid of ethics or morals, often directly contrasted with the *völkisch* values of the Germans who suffer horribly due to British greed. Like all anti-enemy feature films produced under Goebbels' charge, they provided an emotional argument for the necessity of a war against the British, largely divorced from historical fact. Anti-British propaganda films were produced until 1943, ending with *Titanic*.

Wunschkonzert

The popularity of melodramas seems to have been an enduring facet of German cinema, appearing amongst the top five most popular films every year between 1938 and 1941. The genre included the two most popular films produced during the Third Reich: *The Great Love (Die Grosse Liebe 1942)*⁷⁹ and *Wunshckonzert (1940.)* Not only are they

⁷⁹ Romani, *Tainted Goddesses: Female Film Stars of the Third Reich*, 74.

both melodramas, their remarkable similar plots both concern a pair of lovers separated by war, who, against all odds, manage to find each other by the end of the film.

Wunschkonzert (*Request Concert*, 1940)⁸⁰ was the most popular film of 1940, and the second most popular film ever produced in Nazi Germany based on box office receipts⁸¹. While *The Great Love* was more successful, *Wunschkonzert* established their shared formula. In essence the film is a melodrama, but the film blurs genre boundaries in that it is also a musical and a comedy, and undeniably a propaganda piece. It was produced at the personal request of Goebbels, based upon a series of weekly radio shows of the same name. Held every Sunday afternoon, these Request Concerts allowed soldiers stationed on the front to request favorite songs to share with loved ones back home. In theory the concerts connected the soldiers on the front to the civilians at home, allowing for a greater People's Community (*Volksgemeinschaft*.) The broadcasts were a popular success, and Goebbels felt that a feature film based on the radio show would provide a significant boost in his efforts to drum up support for the war.

The film's plot revolves around a young couple, Herbert and Inge, who meet and fall in love during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He is an officer in the Luftwaffe, but with no sign of war on the horizon, they plan to get married and start a family. Suddenly Herbert receives a call to report for duty; the mission is so secret he can't even tell Inge where he'll be sent, however she agrees to wait for him. As the film reveals, the Luftwaffe sends him to fight in the Spanish Civil War as part of the Condor Legion. Three years go by in which neither lover has made an effort to contact the other.

⁸⁰ *Wunschkonzert*. 1940. Directed by Eduard von Borsody. Berlin: Universium Film Ag.

⁸¹ BA, R2/4829-30



Figure 2: Budding love torn asunder by war, only to be reunited through music. Source: *Wunschkonzert*, dir. Eduard von Borsody.

Having participated in the initial invasion, Herbert is now stationed in Poland. In the interim, Helmut, one of Inge's childhood friends, has also joined the Luftwaffe and unknowingly been assigned under Herbert's command. Before he leaves, Helmut proposes to her. Secretly still waiting for Herbert, she turns him down. He leaves for Poland, where he and Herbert become friends. Unaware of Herbert and Inge's relationship, Helmut keeps a photo of her and continues to hold out hope. During the same period, the Request Concerts have become very popular both with the troops and on the home front. Herbert sends in a request to hear the Olympic Fanfare. Listening at

home, Inge is reminded of the time they spent together in 1936 and decides to write him. After exchanging letters, they agree to meet in Hamburg. But as Herbert is about to leave to meet her, he receives orders to fly a reconnaissance mission. Once again he puts duty above his personal feelings and stands her up. Flying with Helmut, they find and photograph an enemy fleet, but upon achieving their objective run into heavy anti-aircraft fire and crash in the ocean. Helmut is wounded, but the crew flags down a passing U-boat and are promptly rescued. Inge visits Helmut in the hospital and encounters Herbert, who found Helmut's picture of Inge in the crashed airplane. Believing they are engaged, he tells Inge he won't get in their way. But when Helmut learns about Herbert and Inge's relationship, he, too, insists on doing the honorable thing and refuses to pursue her further. Finally able to be together, they leave the hospital arm-in-arm to the strains of another *Wunschkonzert*, followed by a brief montage of German military might.

While the plot of *Wunschkonzert* is a very straightforward romantic drama, there are also a number of subplots that serve to emphasize National Socialist ideology, as well as scenes featuring the concerts, including a lengthy musical interlude between the penultimate and ultimate scenes. The central element of *Wunschkonzert* is not the love story, but rather the idea of the People's Community, or *Volksgemeinschaft*. According to Nazi ideology, the German people share a mythical bond that transcends all physical separation, symbolized in the film by specifically German music. The Request Concerts in the film function as physical expressions of the bond, allowing Germans on the front lines and on the home front to communicate with their loved ones. While largely extraneous to the main love story, the numerous subplots provide further expression of this connection between Germans, as symbolized by the music. One such thread concerns

two soldiers who contrive to appear on the show after having saved the lives of five pigs while serving in France. In another, a soldier's wife requests her husband's favorite tune and asks the host of the show to inform him of the birth of their first child. It's no accident then that the main couple in the film fell in love during the Olympics, a symbol of Germany's rebirth, in the presence of Adolph Hitler himself, and rediscover each other through their shared connection to the German People's Community.⁸²

As a film about the special bond connecting the German people during the war, the other major element of *Wunschkonzert* is, of course, the war. Like most other films produced under Nazi Germany directly concerning the ongoing war, the conflict is presented as the undertaking of courageous men who risk injury and death to achieve their objectives, support their comrades, and above all defeat the enemy. The film does not depict any human suffering; death is always instantaneous. The enemy is never seen, and while they always carry weapons, German soldiers never actually fire them. Violence exists, but only the form of artillery barrages fired from a great distance. Brave Luftwaffe pilots drop bombs on unseen enemy positions, while Wehrmacht soldiers sit in dugouts and care for their wounded comrades. The effects of war and violence are systematically suppressed, a common element shared by nearly all propaganda from the early war period. The political aspects of war are entirely absent; it is irrelevant who the enemy are or why they must be fought. The concept of a war as a struggle between nations no longer applies. Instead, warfare is presented as an ordinary occupation, whose practice is a normal, everyday occurrence. To a contemporary viewer, the Germany presented in *Wunschkonzert* is eternally at war with an unnamed *someone*. The events of the film

⁸² *Wunschkonzert*, dir. Von Borsody.

would have seemed far more concrete to the German public who went to see the film by the millions.



Figure 3: Soldiers who have risked everything for a chance to appear on a Musical Request Concert. Source: *Wunschkonzert*, dir. Eduard von Borsody

As the second most popular film of Nazi Germany, it would seem clear that *Wunschkonzert* achieved a resonance with the German public. As such it may be able to offer a picture of the sympathies of the people who went to see it. The film offers an undeniably rose-tinted view of Germany. It is still a place where beautiful couples can fall in love and plan a future together. It is also one of the mightiest countries on earth; assured of victory in any conflict it has entered, or will enter into. It was a Germany that made one proud to be a German. The film manages to unite two of the more prominent of

Goebbels' recurring themes, simultaneously yearning for the perfect harmony of the *Volk's* imaginary past, while striving for the nationalist glory of a Nazi future. The combination of a love story, coupled with the simple joys of family and culture, and the reunification of absent friends and loved ones separated on the battlefield and home front makes for a very charming story if one is able to set aside the emotional and moral implications of Nazism in the present. In some respects, *Wunschkonzert* is an amalgamation of every popular genre in Germany in the early 1940s. The portrayal of military service is almost a combination of adventure film heroism and state-sponsored documentaries about the armed forces; the romantic plot could have been borrowed from any contemporary melodrama; the concert scenes would be at home in any musical. The only type of film not represented is the "anti" film-- anti-Semitic, anti-British, and anti-Russian. With the exception of several scenes extolling the camaraderie and sacrifice of war, *Wunschkonzert* is entirely a "pro" film: pro-Germany, pro-heroism pro-love and above all pro-rosy future. The film would seem to be best categorized as National Socialist escapist entertainment. Its popularity seems to suggest that the German film-going public was willing to support the Nazi regime on the basis of a shared yearning to transform an idealized past into a glittering future.

For Goebbels it was a great propaganda achievement, and one he was to repeat two years later with *The Great Love* (*Die Grosse Liebe*, 1942.)⁸³ Both films were markedly similar in terms of plot and treatment of the war. The hero in *Die Grosse Liebe* is also a Luftwaffe pilot, whose romance with a singer is similarly interrupted by a war characterized by a complete lack of enemies and a constant string of victories.

⁸³ Romani, *Tainted Goddesses: Female Film Stars of the Third Reich*, 74.

The popularity of films like *Die Grosse Liebe* and *Wunschkonzert* indisputably owes a great deal to their melodramatic love stories. But while this genre gave them a great deal of traction with the German public, both films also share the strong nationalistic tendencies of the popular genre of propaganda films. The male hero in each case is a Luftwaffe pilot who falls in love with an Aryan maiden, but is abruptly called back to the service of the Fatherland in the midst of planning a future together. In both cases the hero leaves to fulfill his duty, fighting in a war depicted as a grand adventure devoid of political meaning or human suffering. While love and marriage are also encouraged, they must not interfere with most pressing concern of all: the war. However the war is not depicted as an epic life or death struggle. It is simply a profession for these men; once they have distinguished themselves they are allowed to return home to marry their sweethearts. The causes and conditions of the war aren't even mentioned; it is simply a temporary interruption to everyday life. German victory, it seems, will be the inevitable result of German resolve.

***Titanic* and the Changing War**

If *Wunschkonzert* and similar films about the promise of renewed prosperity and community arising from the war represent Goebbels' greatest cinematic successes during the war, then certainly a film like *Titanic* (1943)⁸⁴ would mark one of the lowest points. In contrast to *Wunschkonzert*'s popular success, Goebbels blocked *Titanic*'s release for ideological reasons after a troubled and costly production. The film can be seen as a bridge between the films of 1939-42 and 1943-45, as a product of Goebbel's anti-British agitational propaganda that wasn't ready for release until after it was no longer of use. Its

⁸⁴ Romani, *Tainted Goddesses: Female Film Stars of the Third Reich*. 73.

shift in the direction Goebbels set for the film industry, both in terms of the ideological content that he believed would best suit the needs of the moment, and in terms of the importance he placed on public taste. It simultaneously hints at the inferior moral degeneracy of the British and upholds the superiority of German values.

Titanic is naturally the story of the ill-fated passenger liner, retold to vilify the British and blame them for the ship's sinking in 1912. The film's portrayal of the British characters is heavily informed by stereotypes and their position as Germany's enemy. They are always impeccably dressed, usually in formalwear regardless of the occasion. Preoccupied with acquiring wealth on the stock market, the constantly maneuver to become richer and more powerful than their fellow countrymen. Compared with other Nazi propaganda films, they share a great deal in common with portrayals of Jews, always scheming and plotting to gain more wealth and power. The British pursuit of profit is presented as a game that has left the players permanently out of touch with reality, unable to see the consequences of their actions. Even as the ship sinks beneath them, Sir Bruce Ismay, the ship's owner, callously uses his position to extort money from J J Astor, the most wealth man on board, offering him a seat on a life boat if Astor will cover Ismay's debts incurred playing the stock market.

While the British attempt to turn a profit out of a calamity of their own making, only the noble German passengers and crew have the fiber to even try to and persuade Captain Smith and Bruce Ismay to slow the ship down, alter course or take some other measure to save the ship. Not only do they present the sole voices of reason, whose wisdom and foresight could have saved 1500 lives, after the ship's collision with iceberg the Germans remain the only ones board determined to do the right thing and carry out an

orderly evacuation prioritizing the women and children. The stark contrast serves to emphasize the valorous nature of Germans, compared with the misguided intentions of the British. If only the British- in both 1912 and 1943- understood the dangers the Germans were trying to confront, they might stop resisting and events would turn out better for everyone. In its historical context, the film's message is a reinforcement of belief in the German war effort against England early in the war (primarily 1939-40, although the popularity of anti-British propaganda peaked during 1941-42 with films such as *Ohm Krüger*). The British, concerned only with generating ever-greater profits, must be defeated so their economic warfare and greed cannot claim further innocent German lives. The preoccupation with financial gain at the expense of everything else, as attributed to the British by German propaganda, simultaneously makes them an object of derision and disgust, as they backstab each other and jockey for ownership of the White Star Line and the *Titanic*. The ship sinks as a direct result of the actions British and their pursuit of greater profits, despite the efforts of well-intentioned German passengers and crewmembers to prevent the calamity.

The circumstances of *Titanic*'s production were anything but ideal. Exterior filming took place aboard the liner SS Cap Arcona, a passenger ship taken over by the German Navy in 1940.⁸⁵ Tragically the ship was later sunk by RAF aircraft a day before the Nazi surrender in 1945, while carrying concentration camp inmates. An estimated 5000 were killed, more than three times as many as the *Titanic*.⁸⁶ Lifeboat scenes were shot in the North Sea, and interiors at Tobis studios in Germany. The first director,

⁸⁵ Mcateer, Sean M. *500 Days: The War in Eastern Europe, 1944-1945*, (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing, 2009,) P 403

⁸⁶ Benjamin Jacobs, *The Dentist of Auschwitz: A Memoir*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 218.

Herbert Selpin, was arrested by Goebbels for making disparaging remarks about the *Kriegsmarine* officers (German Navy) advising the production, who it seems were more interested in the female cast members than the film. After refusing Goebbels's demand to retract the comments, he was found dead in his cell a day later on August 1, 1942, under mysterious circumstances. The official cause of death was ruled a suicide. The remained of the film was completed under the direction of Werner Klinger.⁸⁷ The production was overseen personally by Goebbels, and was an expensive film at a time when Goebbels was intentionally trying to keep production costs down.



Figure 4: Panicking passengers try to escape the Titanic's lower decks prompted Goebbels to ban the film. Source: *Titanic*, dir. Werner Klinger and Herbert Selpin.

⁸⁷ Cinzia Romani, *Tainted Goddesses: Female Film Stars of the Third Reich*, 71

In terms of propaganda, *Titanic* was an unmitigated failure. The film passed the censorship board, but the Theater, in which the premier was to take place, was bombed the night before the opening in early 1943, destroying the master print.⁸⁸ The film finally premiered months later in Paris on November 10, 1943, after which Goebbels swiftly banned it.⁸⁹ The last anti-British propaganda film made during Nazi rule, it was produced during the most crucial juncture in the war. Allied bombers from Britain had begun systematically bombing German cities to undermine civilian morale. German forces in Russia, initially advancing dozens of miles a day, gradually ground to a freezing halt in the Russian Winter outside the cities of Moscow and Leningrad. Meanwhile in late 1942, the German 6th Army at Stalingrad found itself engaged in a life-or-death struggle for control of the city that would ultimately decide the course of the war. *Titanic* was scheduled for release at a time when the Nazi leadership was beginning to realize the war had turned against them, and German civilians were increasingly suffering daily bombing raids. Goebbels' *Sportpalast* Speech on February 18th, 1943, calling for a total war, set a new tone for Nazi propaganda, moving away from the celebration of German victories and the ideological belittlement of their enemies, demanded large sacrifices of the German people in the name of victory. *Titanic*'s anti-British theme was caught at the trailing edge of Goebbels' previous paradigm. Owing to its lengthy production, it was completed at a time when its value as propaganda was rapidly diminishing, and thanks to its delayed premiere it was deemed as having lost all its persuasive currency even before

⁸⁸ Ibid. This fact seems to have been left out of one version of Romani's book.

⁸⁹ Tim Bergerfeld and Sarah Street, *The Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 122.

it was exhibited. The film received limited play in the occupied countries, but was never released in Germany.⁹⁰

Late War Years

“Until the first setback at Stalingrad there can be little doubt that Germans visited the cinema to have their own National Socialist ideas reinforced, and in this respect Goebbels was able to give them what they wanted to see and hear.”⁹¹ However, as the war turned against Germany, faith in the Nazi’s leadership began to waver, and the myth of the German armed forces’ implacability was irrevocably shattered. Goebbels had given himself a distinct advantage by intentionally building on his own prior work. Films demonizing the Allies, reinforced by terror bombing and additional propaganda had taught Germans to hate their adversaries. As Germany’s situation grew increasingly dire, Goebbels placed his hopes for victory in building the public to fight to the death. As his message changed, so did the emphasis on the types of films released from German studios.

By early 1943 Goebbels had become the de facto public face of the Nazi government. The war in the east had become very dire after the defeat at Stalingrad, and Goebbels made no secret that defeat was a very real and terrifying possibility for Germany. Using this fear to drive economic productivity, he offered the possibility of victory at the cost of tremendous sacrifice, provided Germans united to confront the threat.⁹² By way of encouragement, Goebbels concentrated on the production of two

⁹⁰ Ibid, 127.

⁹¹ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 186.

⁹² Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner, *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of destruction, 1937-1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 81.

types of films: escapist entertainment films, and heavy propaganda epics. The lighter fare was intended to offer solace from Germany's situation. One explanation is Goebbels cynically intended to divert people's attention from the war. However this seems not to have been the case. As he wrote in his diary in 1943, "People crave recreation after the grueling days and nights of the past week. They seek solace for their souls."⁹³ His ultimate goal was the victory of the German people; offering a temporary diversion, in Goebbels mind, allowed the masses to persevere longer. While lighter films aided relaxation, ideological films served to direct their efforts. The second type of films consisted of some of the most expensive films ever produced in Nazi Germany. These propaganda epics encouraged a commitment to total war, based on quasi-historical examples where unity in the face of an unstoppable threat had saved the German nation.

The total number of films produced in Germany declined during the final years of the war, especially political films, as production and exhibition became increasingly difficult during 1943-1945.⁹⁴ Supply shortages translated into fewer films produced annually, while bombing raids often destroyed theaters. This situation was worse for state sponsored propaganda films, which required a great deal of oversight to ensure that the political message was conveyed exactly as Goebbels intended it. This often lead to costly delays and re-shoots, and consequently these films, already granted exorbitant budgets by virtue of the importance placed on them, often went grossly over cost.⁹⁵ Director Veit Harlan recounted how he was granted nearly unlimited access to resources and the

⁹³ Lochner, *The Goebbels Diaries*, 440.

⁹⁴ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 159.

⁹⁵ Ibid 26.

freedom to schedule his production as though he were working in peace time.⁹⁶ Mega productions, such as Harlan's *Der grosse König* (*The Great King*, 1942) and *Kolberg* (1945) were still possible because, while the number of feature films produced annually declined, film viewership and ticket revenue were at an all-time high in the final years of the war, a seeming vindication of Goebbels theories on the rejuvenating powers of the cinema. Goebbels chose to concentrate the available resources on a small number of productions that satisfied his desire for films of great artistic value and ideological influence.

The Rise and Fall of Newsreels

The feature film was by no means the sole vehicle for Goebbels' propaganda efforts, especially during the war years. Feature films took a long time to produce. Political content required a great deal of oversight in order to calibrate the desired effect. In a broad sense, features simply did not provide a cost effective means for delivering ideological content. Newspapers and radio broadcasts provided a much more immediate means of propagandizing the masses. The Nazi's single most effective form of mass media was the newsreel. The newsreel, which combined the swift reaction time of print and broadcast with the gripping emotional qualities of the cinema, was an early cornerstone of Nazi propaganda:

“[In]1927 ... Alfred Hugenberg, press baron and leader of the National Conservative Party (DNVP), had bought the largest and most prestigious German film company, Ufa (*Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft*). From now on the political and social activities of the NSDAP were captured by Ufa newsreels (*Ufa-Tonwachen*) and shown to the German public on the large network of Ufa cinemas.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Bruns, *Nazi Cinema's New Women*, 216.

⁹⁷ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 6.

But while they had proved useful to the Nazi party from the late '20s onward, the newsreel truly came into its own as an instrument of propaganda during the early war years of 1939-43. Goebbels had assumed control of newsreel production at the same time he was solidifying his position as de facto head of the film industry, in whose capacity he was able to precisely script every newsreel program that was released. The public was always given a very carefully calibrated notion of the ongoing German victories, and the war effort in general. Newsreels were typically shown before screenings of nearly every feature film (excepting certain documentaries which were in effect feature length newsreels,) priming the audience with a propaganda message before the main attraction. Following the initial outbreak of war, finding suitable content for the newsreels was a relatively straightforward task. During the rapid string of German victories achieved in Poland, France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and the initial invasion of the Soviet Union the programs could have written themselves. Propaganda Film Units, established by Goebbels in 1938, a year in advance of the outbreak of war, were assigned to follow the advancing German armies, provided all the necessary images.⁹⁸ With overwhelming visual evidence, the myth of German invincibility seemed practically a reality.

This proved to be an effective propaganda strategy. As long as Germany continued to be victorious, the newsreel could continue to reinforce National Socialist prejudices under the cover of factual reporting.⁹⁹ The newsreels proved adept at portraying to Germans the unstoppable might of the German military, in no small part because their much shorter production times allowed them to keep pace with the rapid

⁹⁸ Ibid, 164-166.

⁹⁹ Ibid 168.

Blitzkrieg victories.¹⁰⁰ Goebbels himself considered it the most effective form of propaganda. He lamented during a speech in 1941 that the feature film, for the additional production time and higher costs, was at the time a much less useful tool than the newsreel.¹⁰¹

But for all the success Goebbels enjoyed with newsreels between 1939-1943, they became increasingly less effective as the war progressed. One of the biggest challenges was the slowing pace of the war. After 1941, the rapid pace of victories began to stall, and the war became less about *Blitzkrieg* assaults and more about holding onto occupied territory.¹⁰² Another problem arose precisely because of the tight control Goebbels maintained over newsreel production. Goebbels felt he had to be careful in his depiction of the war, as not to undermine public support with realistic depictions of death and destruction. As such, newsreels omitted any mention of military or civilian casualties, damaged or lost vehicles, or any property destruction.¹⁰³ While this sanitized depiction of war as an endless string of effortless German victories may have suited Goebbels' propaganda objectives fine, it rapidly lost its initial effectiveness with German audiences. Public interest diminished as the war dragged on, as newsreels lost their persuasive power due to their unrealistic depictions of victory. While this required Goebbels to re-evaluate his strategy somewhat, he was ultimately forced to change his entire approach entirely in the wake of the German defeat at the Battle of Stalingrad in early 1943.

After the defeat at Stalingrad, even Goebbels could not pretend that the ultimate German victory was soon at hand. Whatever faith the German public had in the veracity

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 163.

¹⁰¹ Ibid 169.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid 170.

of what they were being shown in the newsreels was shattered. Goebbels faced something of a crisis as growing numbers of people preferred to wait outside until the end of the newsreel before taking a seat for the feature presentation. His angry response was to order theater owners to lock their doors after the newsreel began, forcing people to sit through it in order to watch the feature. Ultimately Goebbels changed his tone entirely, marking the shift from early war propaganda into late war propaganda. German victories and militarism were no longer given any role. Since victory by conventional means had become a fast fading hope, Goebbels chose instead to push for Total War, and to devote the efforts of the Propaganda Ministry towards mentally preparing the population to resist the inevitable Soviet counter-invasion.¹⁰⁴

In his book, David Welsh makes the argument that Goebbels, as the Minister of Propaganda, was more concerned with channeling public spirit in support of the war than he was in accurately informing the public about the nature of war. Because Goebbels proscribed what could and could not be shown in the newsreels, Welsh concludes, “the Nazis betrayed how little they were concerned with reality.”¹⁰⁵ However, Goebbels was considerably less interested in propagating a fantasy than he was with channeling public support of the war. As Welsh himself notes, newsreels seldom reported outright lies, instead twisting the truth to support National Socialist ideology. However in molding truth to suit the needs of ideology, Goebbels increasingly fell prey to his own propagandizing. As he pushed for total war, he himself believed more than ever in the ability of German will to resist and defeat the coming invasion, increasingly disconnected from a demoralized German public.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 169.

Kolberg

Kolberg was the last state-sponsored film, and the most expensive film ever produced during the Third Reich. The film's true cost of 8 million marks was never made public in order to avoid outcry.¹⁰⁶ It was shot during 1943-44, as Germany began to suffer defeats on all fronts, on the personal orders of Goebbels. Personally overseen by Goebbels, *Kolberg* was supposed to be his cinematic master opus, a film that would provide ordinary Germans with the emotional steel necessary to fight a total war. Set in 1807 and 1813, *Kolberg* purports to be an historically accurate period film, retelling the story of the brave citizens of *Kolberg* defending their town against the invading forces of Napoleon.¹⁰⁷ However the film's lavish period spectacle belie the desperate circumstances of its production, and the numerous anachronisms, inaccuracies and even outright lies with which Goebbels sought to convince the German people to follow the example of the brave, fictional people of *Kolberg*.

With *Kolberg*, Goebbels sought to reinforce the historical legitimacy of total war as a strategy for victory. By demonstrating that a previous group of Germans had defeated a vastly superior force through sheer determination and a willingness to fight to the last breath, Goebbels sought to inspire present Germans to do the same. Somehow he believed that by elevating the struggle at *Kolberg* to mythic proportions he could reveal the capacity for self-sacrificing bravery in ordinary Germans upon which the Third Reich's desperate hopes for survival rested in the face of the Allied advance. Whether or not Goebbels' beliefs in this matter were unfounded is largely irrelevant; in the last years of the war, nothing else remained. But what is most revealing about Goebbels state of

¹⁰⁶ Bruns, Jana F. *Nazi Cinema's New Women*. 216.

¹⁰⁷ *Kolberg*. 1945. Directed by Veit Harlan. Berlin: Universium Film Ag.

mind with regards to total war is that the “historical” evidence the film presents, including the German victory, were largely fictional. Within the film, the past is not a series of events that preceded and led to the present. Rather the present is necessarily the logical result of the past, in which the latter must be conformed to the constraints of the former. In the process of explaining the past in terms of the present, factual accuracy is no longer paramount. History is no longer an investigation into past events, but a means to manipulate the very definition of truth to suit the needs of a cause. This moment perfectly illustrates how Goebbels manipulated history: the situation at the end of the war demanded the people be inspired to defend the Reich with everything they had left. If the Reich fell, everything was lost. As a result historical accuracy, especially in historical drama, was no longer even a consideration.

While the citizens’ refusal to surrender Kolberg is factual, their willingness to hold fast and die to for a greater Germany seems like an anachronistic injection of late-19th century pan-Germanic rhetoric, combined with a thoroughly 20th century conceptualization of a total war in what is otherwise a lavish period war drama.

The most glaring of the inaccuracies built in to the film is the final victory at Kolberg. The French are depicted withdrawing after suffering unacceptably high casualties, when in reality the siege was lifted after Prussia negotiated a surrender with France.¹⁰⁸ The most bitter irony of the film is that in depicting the struggle a between small group of innocent citizens victimized by larger force, the film inadvertently glorifies actions of resistance against the Nazis.

¹⁰⁸ *Kolberg*, dir Harlan.

As a film, *Kolberg* is not particularly exceptional. The story proper is told as a flashback, bookended with a pair of scenes set five years after the battle for Kolberg, in which Gneisenau, the former commander of the town's military forces calls on Prussian king Frederick William III to mobilize the people of Prussia to fight against the now-retreating Napoleon. This awkward chronological arrangement does not serve the story well, and only seems necessary in order to forge a connection between the town's resistance and the rise of the German state. The film's production consumed an inordinate amount of national resources, including the use of nearly 200,000 soldiers pulled off the eastern front to serve as extras for the massive battle scenes.¹⁰⁹ The film was shot on location in Pomerania, using the expensive Agfacolor color process. Production took place during the summer, so in order to shoot scenes set in the winter, Goebbels ordered large amounts of salt be shipped by railroad to the set, providing the film with fake snow and utilizing resources that may have better served the war effort. However Goebbels seems to have been disinclined to view the situation in simple terms of military application: with the war in the east turning against the Nazis, Goebbels was keen to mobilize not only the armed forces and war industry, but also the German civilian population. In the spirit of the film, they would be called upon to defend their homes in the wake of the advancing Soviets. Goebbels believed *Kolberg* could radicalize the German people, inspiring them to rise up in defense of their homeland, and as such he believed it would be more valuable than a military victory.

¹⁰⁹ Bruns, *Nazi Cinema's New Women*, 216.



Figure 5: Veit Harlan's cinematic contribution to Nazi Germany's defeat. Thousands of soldiers march in *Kolberg*. Source: *Kolberg*, dir. Veit Harlan.

One of the more noteworthy aspects of *Kolberg* is its unusual disregard for the military. The Prussian army is portrayed as largely inept, with the exception of a few capable officers such as Gneisenau, while the civilians, through their willingness to sacrifice everything for their town, prove to be the decisive factor in Napoleon's defeat. One explanation is that this film was intended primarily for civilian audiences, in which case the film's message would be that civilians should no longer rely on the military to win the war for Germany. But by the time film was ready for release, very few cinemas remained open, the Soviets were practically on Germany's doorstep and German civilians were actively pressed into service as a defense force. Under the conditions in which the

film was actually released, total war had erased the division between soldier and civilian. In this sense, Goebbels propaganda campaign was a success; but it was not enough to save Germany. *Kolberg* was finished too late in the war to spend more than a couple weeks in theaters. It was premiered on January 30th, 1945, in Berlin. Very few cinemas in Germany were still running. It received very limited distribution, shown almost exclusively to Nazi party members. On January 10th a copy was flown and airdropped into the La Rochelle U-boat base in France.¹¹⁰ It was screened on January 30th for the remaining soldiers and sailors concurrently with the Berlin premiere.¹¹¹ Vice-Admiral Schirlitz, the base commander, wrote Goebbels following the premiere, stating that “deeply moved by the artistic presentation of the heroic action of the Kolberg fortress, [the men under his command]...pledge to emulate the courageous struggles at home.”¹¹² He later surrendered to the Allies in May 1945.

In terms of its original intentions, *Kolberg* was a failure. Goebbels lavished an inordinate amount of resources on a film that ultimately did nothing to affect the course of the war. Very few German civilians, the film’s primary audience, ever had the chance to see it. The film simply took too long to make. The small number of people who did see it were either suitably unaffected by it’s message, or not in positions to alter the course of the war. In the final months of the war Goebbels devoted his efforts to crafting messages that were both ideologically suited to instilling his total war doctrine and palatable enough that a war-traumatized public would be willing go to see them. German cinema from the later war years was largely given to topical escapist fantasies combined with

¹¹⁰ Romani, *Tainted Goddesses*, 87.

¹¹¹ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 196.

¹¹² Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, 296.

veiled propaganda. The films Goebbels commissioned, promising a victory that had only to be willed into existence, belied Germany's grim outlook. However in finding the balance between popularity and propaganda in the final days of the war, Goebbels sided with his own fantasies of a triumph through will. Ultimately, *Kolberg* is a testament to Goebbels' belief that an ideological victory could trump a military, which came too late to have any effect.

Conclusion

Goebbels declared in 1933 "the German cinema has the mission of conquering the world as the vanguard of the Nazi Troops."¹¹³ Over the next 12 years he learned to conquer the minds of Germans and built support for Nazi Germany's war effort. In order to do so, Goebbels worked within the public's existing prejudices, both in terms of taste and ideological susceptibility. His ability to manipulate prejudice to serve, while imperfect, is nevertheless impressive and terrifying for his audacity and relative degree of success.

While Goebbels propaganda themes changed drastically between 1933 and 1945, they always conveyed the message he deemed necessary to suit the needs of the moment, in a manner he calculated would have the greatest effect. When Nazis assumed power, he established almost from the onset his preference for subtle approach propaganda, which left the viewer largely unaware they were being inculcated in an ideology. Films like *Hitlerjunge Quex* and the other films in the Martyr Trilogy are examples of the type of overt propaganda Goebbels opposed, and the manner in which the film industry sought to curry favor with the new leaders of Germany. While his rivals pushed for these overt

¹¹³ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 1.

celebrations of Nazism, Goebbels' successful efforts at excluding them from influence over the film industry, which willingly embraced his policies, thereby ensured the primacy of his vision.

In order to more effectively pursue the indoctrination of Nazi ideology, Goebbels assumed greater and greater degrees of direct control over the German film industry, beginning in 1934 with the passage of the Reich Cinema law. This led its subsequent reorganization, and ultimately its nationalization as a branch of the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. As part of his broader propaganda strategy, Goebbels used the cinema to vindicate earlier Nazi decisions and policies, making emotional arguments that appealed to the German sense of community and nationalism. Part of Goebbels' struggle in the years preceding the war was to maintain the industry's profitability, which was struggling from a combination of falling box office revenues and rising production costs. While nationalization led to a partial decrease in production costs, at least on non-political productions, the war brought about an increase in cinema attendance. Propaganda films portraying the might of the German military and the deceitful, wicked nature of Germany's enemies became increasingly popular. *Jud Süß* depicted Jews, the Nazi's ultimate racial enemy, as treacherous, slippery demonic characters whose only aims were to destroy Germany, seduce virtuous Aryan women and make a profit in the process. Others, like *Ohm Krüger* or *Titanic* portrayed the British as a tyrannical, immoral people who throughout history had inflicted grievous suffering and abuse on innocent Germans.

The German public's taste in film remained largely unchanged despite the increase in agitational propaganda. Dramatic films remained the most popular type in the

years following the outbreak of war, as they had in the preceding years. While newsreels became the primary source of disseminating propaganda during the early part of the war, films about normal life in wartime achieved the greatest successes of the entire Nazi period. *Wunschkonzert* established a precedent that achieved great resonance with German audiences. It offered the possibility of a normal, prosperous life in wartime and the imminent promise of victory over Germany's enemies. However, most wartime propaganda was directly tied to military victories, which became increasingly rare after 1943.¹¹⁴ As Germany's situation grew increasingly dire as the Allies pressed the nation from both sides, the tone of German films changed. Instead of historical dramas about the suffering of past generations of Germans at the hands of Germany's present, he increasingly called for films drawing comparisons between the present situation and past struggles. In film, newsreels, speeches and print, Goebbels laid Germany's desperation clear in no uncertain terms: the nation faced annihilation at the hands of its enemies unless it could unite, as it had in times past, to confront the threat. Through great personal sacrifice and sheer determination, Germany could prevail and defeat its enemies in a total war. This message was repeated in films like *Kolberg*, which presented a (false) historical equivalent to Germany's present situation, when a group of Germans had defeated a vastly superior force through endurance of personal hardship and sheer willpower.

However, Goebbels efforts were either too little or too late. Ultimately, his total war campaign amounted only to greater destruction and death on Germany's march to defeat. It may indeed have persuaded Germans to fight harder, but had little effect on the outcome. Goebbels took his own life on May 1, 1945 as the Red Army pushed into

¹¹⁴ Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933-1945*, 159.

Berlin, leaving as his legacy the unprecedented manipulation of a modern nation through mass media. The feature films he oversaw in Germany are a testament to the power of motion pictures to convey ideas and the ease with which the medium can be used to persuade and inspire, even destructively so. While the absence of the original emotional context serves to diminish the sway of even the most persuasive of Nazi Germany's ideological films, they nevertheless serve as reminders about the persuasive nature of visual evidence. However, it is also necessary to remember that so long as a person has the choice of whether or not view a film, they have the ultimate responsibility for the lasting impression it leaves on them. Goebbels learned to successfully anticipate the yearnings of the German public, and responded accordingly with messages tailored to influence them according to his designs. In choosing to see *Wunschkonzert* or *Jud Süß*, and have their sentiments altered in accordance with the film's ideology, it can be said that Germans offered tacit support for the regime's policies. Using more data of this sort, it is possible to further understand how Germans as a collective reacted to Goebbels propaganda campaigns, and the events that shaped Nazi Germany. But the extent to which every man, woman and child believed in National Socialist ideology is a matter personal to each, and a task which historians are ill equipped to pursue, regardless of the tools available.

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