

Letter from a reader

9 October 2003

Dear WSWs,

In light of the corporate media's current demonstration of its ability to manufacture the public's perception of reality, Leni Riefenstahl's appearance in the press could not be more timely. For instance, a recent poll produced the deplorable result that nearly 70 percent of the American public thinks Iraq had a role in the September 11 attacks, despite there being no evidence to this effect. The corporate news outlets have made no serious effort to correct this misconception, indicating that it is deliberate.

Stefan Steinberg's article, ["Reality doesn't interest me...": Leni Riefenstahl—propagandist for the Third Reich] was tremendously informative in comparison to nearly all commentary in the English-speaking corporate press. Although such pieces acknowledged Riefenstahl's wrongdoing, most pulled their punches and shied away from directly confronting the issues raised by her figure. I didn't get the impression that many of these articles were sufficiently critical of the Third Reich's accomplice, a seemingly easy target. The *New York Times* gave her as much leeway as to write: "Whether out of vanity or naïveté, Ms. Riefenstahl may well have believed that her artistic independence was never compromised, that she did not 'sell' her talents to the Nazis who financed *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*."

In most of these articles her biographical details were provided along with her preposterous defenses of herself. Perhaps nothing more needs to be said about Riefenstahl's obvious wrongdoing, but I still sense an incongruity. A few months ago media pundits and even politicians were labeling journalists such as Peter Arnette, and all people who opposed the Iraq war, as "traitors" (under the possible penalty of death). CNN's Christine Amanpour has been recently labeled a "spokeswoman for Al Qaida" on account of her meek attempts at damage control, despite her own cooperation in promoting the Iraq war.

Death or imprisonment to the "traitors," but not to naive Leni? A Nazi accessory receives relatively benign treatment from the spin doctors for the reason that they themselves are fully complicit in the crimes of the Bush administration (i.e., waging an aggressive war, just as the Nazis did). When discussing Riefenstahl, the constant charges of media "bias" and "ideology" suddenly lay quiet, as if they were no longer factors. Otherwise, the public might get a hint that rather than "liberal bias," there is even the possibility that the media could be skewed to the right.

Every effort seems to have been made to keep media consumers from drawing any kind of a connection between the propaganda of the Nazi regime, and that of the United States' "free press." The *Washington Post* made an interesting distinction in its article about Riefenstahl, when Frank Capra's film series, "Why We Fight," was referred to as "the inspirational films he made for the U.S. armed forces [during World War II]." Such films are not "propaganda." Rather, they are "inspirational."

Yet anyone can watch these films on DVD and see them for what they actually are. In "The Battle of Russia" the viewer cannot even recognize the "evil empire" from Capra's sympathetic treatment of it. The Allied intervention during the Russian Revolution 25 years earlier seems never to have happened, nor are Stalin's purges mentioned. Stalin was "our kind of guy" when he directly served the interests of American capital, which is hardly "inspiring."

A final and telling piece of fluff came from Roger Ebert, who wrote that "Nazism was not only a political movement but an exercise in mass hypnotism drawing on fetishistic imagery." Presumably, another "exercise" could be conducted in which another villain simply "hypnotizes" everybody. But of course the world consists now, as it did in Riefenstahl's day, of objective as well as subjective factors. In the current balance the Bush administration's objective military

strength, and its desire to use it in order to counteract the economy's objective weaknesses, is still dependent upon the subjective factor of the American public being misinformed enough in order to let this happen. It is here that the complicity of the modern media propagandists comes into play, and it also here that the efforts of the WSWS will hopefully make a decisive difference.

I also noted that as far as the European media establishment goes both German media tycoon Leo Kirch and the president of the German Film Industry Association, Steffen Kuchenreuther, paid their respects at Riesenstahl's funeral. It's no wonder that German military spending increases so sharply (20 percent per year, at times) while most of the German public remains unaware. Meanwhile, the European press delights in exposing the crude lies of the Bush administration, to a certain extent. They mock the claim that the war in Iraq was not about oil, but in the same space report that German troops were recently deployed to the Congo for "humanitarian" purposes, as if no strategic or economic interests existed in that country. In doing this, they are obviously holding a double-edged sword.

RG

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