

The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler—how the studios suppressed films about Nazi crimes

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The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler, by Ben Urwand, Belknap Press, 2013

In his prologue to *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*, author Ben Urwand observes that the notion of collaboration between Nazi Germany and Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s should “shatter a common idea about Hollywood,” that it was “synonymous with anti-fascism during its golden age.”

Based on considerable research in archives in the US and Germany, Urwand proves indisputably that an agreement between Nazi Germany and Hollywood's hierarchy did exist and, furthermore, that the film executives' decision to enter into the pact was rooted in their determination to maintain a presence in the lucrative German market.

Urwand, born in 1977 in Sydney, Australia, the son of Jewish immigrants, is a Junior Fellow of the Society of Fellows at Harvard University. His book traces the development of Hollywood's pact with Adolf Hitler from the latter's rise to power in 1933 to the end of the Second World War. In the process, Urwand recounts how Nazi Germany came to play an increasing role in determining the kinds of films Hollywood would (and would not) make during those years.

The book, published by Belknap Press, is largely free of the ordinary academic's formal evenhandedness and timidity, although the author is clearly unwilling to confront the deep commonality of interest between the American ruling elite and Nazi Germany.

Hitler's obsession with cinema was such, Urwand explains, that the Nazi leader reserved time each evening for movie viewing, and concluded that British and especially American films were superior artistically and as propaganda.

However, when it came to war themes that jeopardized the German national image or what the fascist leader considered German morale, Hitler argued that a war was fought on two fronts: the battlefield and propaganda. According to Urwand, if Hitler understood a film to be threatening Germany, “then he was at war.”

Hitler's first act in this conflict, although his party had not yet taken power, was to declare *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930, based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque) guilty of damaging the German image. The anti-war film's release

coincided with the Nazis making political considerable gains in the Reichstag [parliament]. This gave Hitler's opinion enough weight so that, after two years in which the film was either banned or censored in Germany, Carl Laemmle, president of Universal Pictures, agreed to cut eight scenes and continue making money in the German market rather than resist the Nazi demands.

The groundwork for collaboration had been laid. Universal would also alter a number of other movies after meeting with Dr. Martin Freudenthal, a special agent of the German Foreign Office.

By 1933, Freudenthal could report to Hitler, now chancellor, that Universal would collaborate with the Nazis “for the German market.” RKO had also agreed to operate “in close collaboration” with Germany, and United Artists promised “the closest collaboration.”

This collaboration would deepen throughout the decade of the 1930s. When the Nazis insisted the Hollywood studios fire their Jewish salesmen in Germany, the studio heads, most of whom were Jewish and well aware of what the Hitler regime was doing to the Jews, readily acquiesced to the Nazis' demand.

Freudenthal's replacement as the German government's agent, Georg Gyssling, added further grounds for the censorship and the outright banning of Hollywood films. In 1933, Herman J. Mankiewicz (who would later co-write *Citizen Kane* with Orson Welles) wrote a play, *The Mad Dog of Europe*, which honestly depicted the reality in Germany under Hitler. When Sam Jaffe at RKO agreed to produce a film version of Mankiewicz's play, the Nazi regime, through Gyssling and the Hays Office (which enforced the Motion Picture Production Code), prevented the movie from being made on the grounds that it would adversely affect the other Hollywood studios' relationship with Germany and that American audiences would find it anti-German.

Urwand asserts that the blocking of *The Mad Dog of Europe* defined the terms of the relationship for the rest of the decade, i.e., the Hollywood studios would not portray or criticize the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. During these years, the Nazis had final approval on over 400 American films.

In 1934 even stricter censorship guidelines were introduced when *Tarzan the Ape Man* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1932) was found to undermine German propaganda in regard to “healthy racial feelings.”

The Nazis then cast a larger net over Hollywood productions. All

gangster and horror films were banned from German theaters on the grounds that they promoted immorality, leading to the censorship of such American films across Europe. Hollywood had no trouble with this action and adjusted its productions accordingly.

Another “adjustment” was made following *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass, the vicious anti-Semitic pogrom) in November 1938. MGM found an effective way to export profits made in Germany (a 1933 Nazi law prevented foreign companies from taking money out of the country) by first loaning the money made from profits to firms that needed credit, then receiving bonds in exchange for the loan, and finally selling the bonds to foreign countries.

However, the firms that received MGM funds in the first place were part of the armament industry; in brief, MGM was helping to finance the production of German weaponry.

Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, did not fundamentally change matters; in fact, MGM donated eleven of its most popular films to Germany to help with the war relief effort.

Ironically, MGM produced the first anti-Nazi film *Mortal Storm* (Frank Borzage, 1940), and even though it made no direct reference to the Jews, the movie still drew Gyssling’s ire. Shortly thereafter, the one remaining American studio that still had a presence in Germany, Paramount, was forced to leave the country, as well as all the territories occupied by German forces.

The Nazis’ expulsion of the studios, one would think, coming shortly before America’s entry into the war, ought to have freed Hollywood to make more hard-hitting films about the Hitler regime, but Urwand notes that “the years of collaboration with Nazi Germany had marked [the studio heads] too deeply” for a dramatic change to occur. Of the 1000 films produced during the war, 242 made direct references to the Nazis and 190 to Hitler. Urwand argues, however, that only one, *None Shall Escape* (André de Toth, 1944), “revealed what the Nazis were doing to the Jews.”

A major flaw in *The Collaboration: Hollywood’s Pact with Hitler* is Urwand’s inability to seriously deal with the American establishment’s hypocrisy and duplicity.

Prominent screenwriter Ben Hecht (*Scarface*, *Design for Living*, *Viva Villa*, *Nothing Sacred* and many more screenplays) is singled out by Urwand as “the [only] voice that provided a corrective to (the Hollywood studio heads’) silence” about the Nazi government’s murderous policies.

Once Hecht learned of the genocide going on in Germany and eastern Europe, he initiated a campaign to educate the American public and demand action to save the European Jews. He wrote “advertisements” in the form of poems and articles that appeared in newspapers; and organized—along with the Committee for a Jewish Army—a pageant in New York that attracted 40,000 people.

Under pressure from Hecht, the Committee, and other Jewish groups and individuals, the Roosevelt administration finally created the War Refugee Board in 1944 to rescue approximately 200,000 Jews—this after the Roosevelt administration had known about the systematic extermination of the Jews for some time without lifting a finger.

Deeply embittered by the lives lost due to Roosevelt’s inaction, Hecht would write years later that, “We [the Emergency

Committee] were creating a new school of Jews in the U.S.—one which refused to believe blindly in the virtues of their enemies in Democracy’s clothing.”

Urwand accuses Hecht of making a claim that “may have been too strongly worded,” but the screenwriter had done nothing more or less than state the case exactly and eloquently. By refusing to credit Hecht for correctly characterizing the policies of “American democracy,” the author also fails to acknowledge the shared interests of the powers that be in the US and Nazi Germany.

A continued profit stream for the film studios was certainly a significant motive for remaining silent about the Nazis’ crimes. However, there was more than immediate economic gain at stake. The studio heads reflected broader moods within the US ruling class. The ruling elites of Europe and America were generally sympathetic toward Hitler’s brutal repression of left-wing parties and all independent workers’ organizations, and also hopeful that Nazi Germany would invade and destroy the Soviet Union. They feared the prospect of social revolution in Germany far more than they did a fascist regime in power in Berlin.

The record demonstrates irrefutably that the studio heads, Jewish or otherwise, were more consumed by anti-communism and the desire to defend the profit system than they were by concerns about the deadly consequences of anti-Semitism. After all, they pursued the same course in the US after World War II, allying themselves with “anti-red” witch-hunters such as the rabid anti-Semite John Rankin, Democratic Congressman from Mississippi. (Similarly, the film studios accommodated themselves to Southern racists in the US by avoiding films that dealt with racial bigotry, oppression and lynchings, or that treated such events as the Civil War in a forthright manner.)

Urwand’s refusal to draw the sharpest conclusions from the history he so meticulously presents, which would have provided the reader with a deeper understanding of the pact between Hollywood and Nazi Germany, mars what is an important work of scholarship. Nonetheless, *The Collaboration: Hollywood’s Pact with Hitler* is a valuable exposure that should be read.



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