



## Waging Warners' War

by Randi Hokett

The connection between Hollywood and American politics has become an increasingly pertinent area of inquiry in our post 9/11 culture. Viewed through the lens of history, it is clear that the marriage between the media, its moguls and the American political system has long affected public life in this country and around the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than at Warner Bros. during World War II, where a personal crusade against fascism ultimately became an important part of American public policy.

Hollywood, like much of the United States, did not appear to oppose Nazism in the 1930s. Despite the fact that Hollywood's film empire had been built largely by Jews, there was little overt acknowledgement of the atrocities committed against Jews in Germany. The exception was Warner Bros. Armed with one of Hollywood's most powerful studios, Jack and Harry Warner fought a war against Hitler with all the tools at their disposal—personal, professional and political.

### Before the War

A 1933 Nazi edict demanded that American film studios operating in Germany fire all German-Jews. Despite the tremendous financial impact it would have on the studio, this convinced Harry Warner that it was time to pull out of Germany. By 1934, Warner Bros. had severed business ties with Germany and Harry had announced plans to produce an anti-Nazi film.

Producing an anti-Nazi film in 1934 was easier said than done, and no studio would release an anti-Nazi film until *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1930) by Warner Bros. Complex issues conspired against the Warners' plans to create a film naming the Nazi threat. As Hitler gained power, the distribution of such a film in Europe grew increasingly difficult. At home, isolationist sentiment and anti-Semitism, together with industry concern that an anti-Nazi film could damage relations with the still important German film market, resulted in a 1934 Production Code Administration (PCA) ban on anti-Nazi films.

Unable to explicitly fight fascism through feature films, Jack and Harry monitored the spread of Nazism throughout Europe and America. They were active with the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, provided jobs for refugees from Europe and raised money for anti-Nazi organizations. Harry, especially, acted as a watchdog, even enlisting studio employees to inform him of anti-Semitic and Nazi activities.<sup>1</sup> Harry kept a list of newsreel coverage of the escalating situation in Germany. In his zealous fight to root out Nazism, Harry banned the 1938 newsreel *Inside Nazi Germany* from all Warner theatres, believing it to be pro-Nazi. But even Harry's daughter Doris disagreed that the newsreel was pro-Nazi, telling him, "I think that for you to accuse the March of Time of making a pro-Nazi picture is all wrong."<sup>2</sup> In 1939, when a group of Nazi newspaper editors toured the Metro Goldwyn Mayer lot, Harry took MGM to task, admonishing, "I just can't bring myself to believe that you people would entertain those whom the world regards as the murderers of their own families."<sup>3</sup>

◀ 8. A souvenir pop-up from the benefit premiere of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942).

As part of his crusade against Nazism, Harry gave several speeches—to employees, industry heads and The American Legion—urging listeners to be on guard for Nazi presence in America. Complacency, he believed, would leave America vulnerable to fascist infiltration.

Jack and Harry both made numerous appeals to President Franklin Roosevelt, whom they had known since aiding Roosevelt in his 1933 presidential run. The Warners pledged to aid the country in whatever way possible and specifically offered up the use of the studio for the good of the country, an offer the Roosevelt Administration would eventually take advantage of. Though surviving memos are often vague and cloaked in diplomatic language, Harry once suggested to Roosevelt a way in which a still officially isolationist America could offer aid to war-torn Britain “if we consider the Atlantic Ocean our life-line, it is an assured fact that the Island of Great Britain is certainly a part of the life-line. What fault could anyone find if we undertook to man the Island to protect it from invasion.”<sup>4</sup> In an effort to aid Britain, Jack and Harry donated two Spitfire planes to the British Royal Air Force. The Warners named the war planes after President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

At the studio, a 1933 Warner Bros. cartoon *Bosko's Picture Show* was the first American production to poke fun at Hitler, who was caricatured as the incompetent ruler of Pretzel, Germany.<sup>5</sup> Warner Bros. feature films attacked fascist ideology by confronting the then controversial issues of racial and religious discrimination. *The Life of Emile Zola*, for instance, chronicles the life of French writer Emile Zola and his efforts to clear accused traitor Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, of racially motivated charges. Though the eradication of specific references to Dreyfus' Jewishness may have weakened the film as a commentary on the contemporary European situation, the film made strides towards addressing the topic and found tremendous support in Jewish communities.<sup>6</sup>

The Warner Bros. 1937 film *Black Legion*, a true story about a fascist, Ku Klux Klan-like organization in the Midwest, continued to test the boundaries of PCA rules against “the provocative and inflammatory subject of racial and religious prejudice.” Joseph Breen notified Jack Warner on June 18, 1936 that the film would not receive approval. However, a meeting between the PCA and *Black Legion* writers on June 19<sup>th</sup> shows they planned to “treat the subject (of racial and religious prejudice) as broadly and strongly as (they) wished” so that they might test the limits of the PCA rules.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary criticism reproached Hollywood for not addressing the situation in Europe. A *New York Times* review praised *Black Legion* but also criticized Hollywood in general for being afraid to address social issues outside the U.S.<sup>8</sup> But the film was breaking boundaries and would help pave the way for the first anti-Nazi film from a major studio, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.

The Warner Bros. series of Patriotic Shorts, based on important historic American figures and events, promoted American democracy. Begun in 1936, the series hit its stride in 1938 when Jack Warner declared, “I am more than ever convinced that we have a double duty to perform. We must ‘sell America’ while we entertain the world.”<sup>9</sup> Patriotic shorts like *The Declaration of Independence*, *Lincoln in the White House*, *Flag of Humanity* and *Sons of Liberty* “sold” American ideals and the concept that sometimes those ideals had to be defended.

*Sons of Liberty* stands out as a particularly interesting example from the series. It tells the story of the important role played by Jewish banker Haym Salomon in helping finance the American Revolution. The short depicts a scene in a synagogue—bold imagery in a time when Jewish identity had been largely eliminated from the American movie screen.<sup>10</sup>

In 1939, Warner Bros. released the groundbreaking film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. *Confessions* was based on actual events and warned Americans of the presence of Nazis in America, a message that echoed Harry's earlier speeches. Although concentration camps are mentioned in the film, like the earlier films dealing with racial and religious discrimination, the word “Jew” is never uttered.

*Confessions* was a controversial film from the very start, and Warner Bros. considered leaving out the credits. In the end, the credits were included, though some of the actors chose to work under an alias to protect European family members from Nazi retaliation. A particularly striking ad for the film depicted a man, feet indifferently thrown upon his desk, spouting, “Nazi spies in America? That's got nothing to do with me!” “He'll learn differently when he sees *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*,” the ad confidently retorts.<sup>11</sup> The ad demonstrates how well the Warners understood contemporary attitudes toward the European conflict, and their faith in their ability to influence popular opinion through film. *Confessions* elicited strong reaction from all sides. Warner Bros. received letters from the public exclaiming their new-found

9. The ad campaign for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) confronted isolationist sentiment head on.

“NAZI SPIES  
IN AMERICA?  
THAT'S GOT  
NOTHING TO  
DO WITH ME!”

He'll learn differently  
when he sees



# Confessions of a NAZI SPY

EDWARD G. ROBINSON

FRANCIS LEDERER · George Sanders · Paul Lukas · Henry O'Neill

Directed by ANATOLE LITVAK · Presented by WARNER BROS.

The picture that will  
open the eyes of 130  
million Americans!

Screen Play by Milton Krims and John Wexley · Technical advisor Leon G. Turrou, former G-Man · A First Nat'l Picture



T H E A T R E



10. *Lincoln in the White House* (1939), part of the Patriotic Shorts series that celebrated important American historical figures and events.



11. Nana Bryant as Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, in *Flag of Humanity* (1940).



12. Claude Rains as Haym Salomon in *Sons of Liberty* (1939), one of the few films to portray a Jewish character.

patriotism, and employees gushed that they were proud to work for an organization willing to produce such a bold and timely film. Detractors accused the Warners of communism.<sup>12</sup> *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was so effective that it inspired a second PCA ban on anti-Nazi films.

Though the second ban on anti-Nazi films slowed the Warners' direct attack on fascism, they did not lay down their celluloid weapon altogether. In mid-1940, Warner Bros. was asked by military officials to produce a series of short films aimed at introducing the public to the various branches of the military. Shown in commercial theatres, shorts like *Service with the Colors*, *March On, Marines* and *The Tanks Are Coming* were likely intended to help prepare the country for armament. Several of these groundbreaking Technicolor shorts received Academy Awards for Best Short Subject. The Patriotic Military Shorts were written by Owen Crump, who would be instrumental, along with Jack Warner, in organizing the Army Air Corps' First Motion Picture Unit (FMPU) once the U.S. entered the war.

In 1941, with the PCA anti-Nazi rule again relaxed, Warner Bros. released *Underground*, a film about a resistance group fighting the Nazis in Germany. The film makes several references to concentration camps and includes a shocking scene within one. Nazi leaders were shown beating and intimidating members of the resistance as well as their own officers, but like *Confessions*, the atrocities committed against Jews were never mentioned.

That same year saw the release of the Warner Bros. hit *Sergeant York*. The film followed the life of World War I hero Sgt. Alvin York in his transformation from hillbilly troublemaker to Christian pacifist to war hero.<sup>13</sup> In the tradition of Americanism established by the studio's Patriotic Shorts, *Sergeant York* emphasized simple American ideals and the idea that a man, even a pacifist, must sometimes step up and fight when those ideals are threatened.

As the country moved closer to war, isolationist senators recognized the Warner Bros. message. Senators Gerald Nye (North Dakota) and Bennett Champ Clark (Missouri) accused Hollywood of being a Jewish-controlled monopoly involved with the Roosevelt Administration in warmongering. Senator Nye proclaimed that Hollywood Jews were more of a problem than Hitler was<sup>14</sup> and that the motion picture industry did not deserve First Amendment protection.<sup>15</sup> The House and the Senate brought charges of propagandizing



13. *Service with the Colors* (1940), one of a series of military shorts introducing movie-goers to branches of the military.



14. *March On, Marines* (1940), a military short produced at the request of military officials.

against the motion picture industry and named Warner Bros. as the ringleader. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Sergeant York* were identified as films intended to incite the country to war.

Harry Warner testified in September 1941 before the Senate Subcommittee that Warner Bros. films were not propaganda but were strictly for entertainment.<sup>16</sup> Warner argued that Warner Bros. films—specifically *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Sergeant York*—were based on real events and that the films had been tremendously popular. But statements made by both Jack and Harry and their memos to President Roosevelt and others reveal that the Warner brothers were well aware of the persuasive power of the motion picture.

### America (and Hollywood) Goes to War

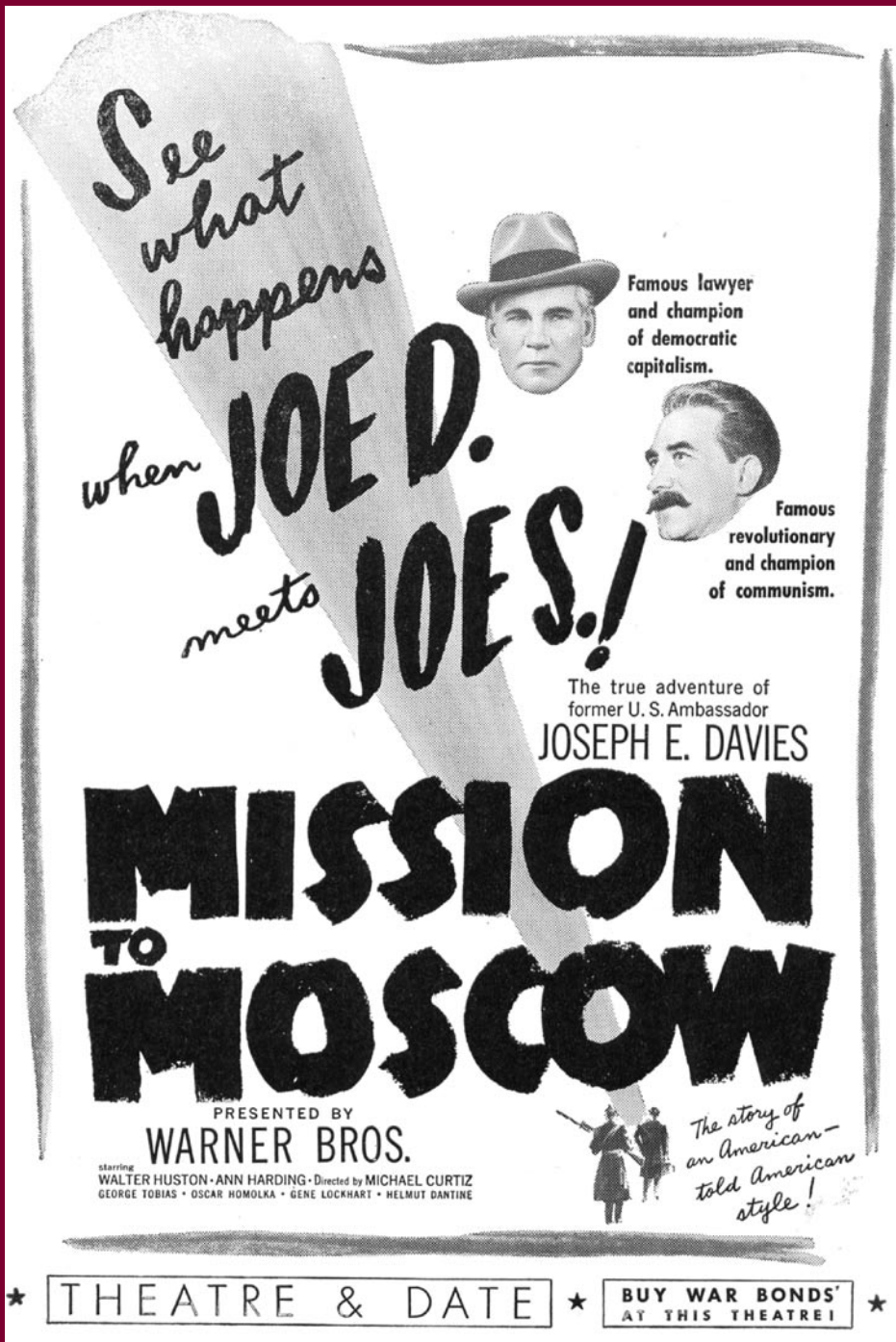
The Senate Subcommittee hearings on propaganda in motion pictures were halted when the U.S. entered the war in December 1941. The President almost immediately issued a memorandum recognizing the importance of film to the war effort and stated that the government should not censor the industry. With war declared, the Warners could continue their crusade against fascism without fear of reprisal. In 1942, Jack Warner was commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel and helped establish the Army's (FMPU), which would eventually include enlisted men from all the major studios. Warner Bros. donated studio space in east Hollywood and immediately put Warner Bros. staff to work on *Winning Your Wings*, a recruitment short starring Lieutenant James Stewart. The studio produced the short without profit.

Between its inception in 1942 and the end of the war in 1945, the FMPU used military personnel and studio resources to produce hundreds of short films for public and military use. The films gave instruction on numerous subjects including identifying the enemy, properly using weapons and contributing to the war effort on the home front.

Warner Bros. aided the FMPU in producing dozens of short films. Striking set drawings from *The Battle against Shop Thirteen*, one of the Warner Bros. produced shorts, caricature the leaders of Germany, Italy and Japan as befuddled buffoons, and were likely intended to illustrate a less-than-threatening enemy. Warner Bros. previously used caricature, in *Bosko's Picture Show*, to spoof Hitler and would use it again in an episode from their racy animated series of military training shorts, *Private SNAFU*.

The Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures, the government's liaison to Hollywood, was formed after the U.S. entered the war. The Bureau established guidelines by which the motion picture industry could support the war effort. Whenever possible, films were to fall into one of six Bureau-approved categories: The Production Front, The Issues, The Enemy, The Armed Forces, Our Allies and The Home Front.

In November 1942, Jack Warner resigned his commission as Lieutenant Colonel. Though he had been in the military for less than a year, Jack had helped establish and organize the FMPU. With that



16. F.D.R. in Washington, 1941.

17. The *Sergeant York* (1941) marketing campaign positioned York among other important historic figures, including Teddy Roosevelt.

◀ 15. This advertisement for *Mission to Moscow* (1943) suggests that Joseph Stalin is a lot like Ambassador Joseph Davies.

task completed, Jack felt he could be of more service back at the studio where they were producing “probably one hundred or more Feature and Short subjects pertaining to the War Effort.”<sup>17</sup> Many of those films followed the Bureau of Motion Picture guidelines and celebrated the American military, her allies and patriotic historical figures.

Films in the Production Front category are probably best represented by the Republic film *Rosie the Riveter*. Production Front films were intended to keep up morale and to show Americans that they could contribute even at home. *Wings for the Eagle* is one of the few films in the Production Front category made by Warner Bros. Films that fell into The Issues category were intended to highlight the issues of the war and was exemplified, at Warner Bros., by the Bette Davis film *Watch on the Rhine*. But it was in the other four categories that Warner Bros. found an extension of the work they had already done to combat fascism.

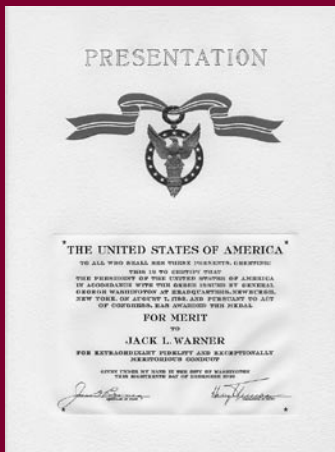
Warner Bros. Armed Forces films celebrated the American military with heroic wartime stories. Titles like *Air Force*, *Dive Bomber*<sup>18</sup> and *Destination Tokyo* depict diverse groups of men, bonded through their military service, as they faced conflict and eventually emerged victorious.<sup>19</sup> The stories of American military victory were designed to help maintain morale for viewers with relatives fighting overseas.

Similar filmic devices were found in Warner films like *Captains of the Clouds* (about the Royal Canadian Air Force), which fell into the Our Allies category. However, the studio’s most notorious film, *Mission*

to *Moscow*, was produced to suggest that Russia was our ally in the fight against Nazism. Based on the memoirs of Joseph Davies, U.S. ambassador to Russia, and produced, according to Jack Warner, at the request of President Roosevelt himself, the film garnered strong reactions on both sides. Warner Bros. received many letters both praising their efforts and accusing the Warners of being communists.<sup>20</sup> Advertisements for the film simplify the differences between the U.S. and Russia, touting the film as the “Story of Two Guys Named Joe”—Joseph Davies and Joseph Stalin. Perhaps as a preemptive strike, advertisements stressed that the film was “the Story of an American—Told American Style.”<sup>21</sup> Though *Mission to Moscow* was clearly in line with the Warners’ war against Nazism, the film would haunt the studio during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Having fought for so long to produce the first anti-Nazi film, Warner Bros. was adept at the presentation of *The Enemy*. *Across the Pacific* is a story of intrigue depicting Sydney Greenstreet and Sen Young as an American and a Japanese-American working covertly for the Japanese cause. A publicity photo of Young as Joe Totsuiko portrays the enemy standing, a cigarette defiantly hanging from his lips, and a less-than-subtle spider web rising up in shadow behind him—Totsuiko is clearly not a man to be trusted.<sup>22</sup>

Regarded by many film critics and fans as one of the best movies of all time, *Casablanca* is a fascinating study of the many faces of *The Enemy*. There is never any question that the Nazis are the enemy and



18. A Medal of Merit was given to Jack Warner for his contribution to the war effort.



19. Dennis Morgan plays aircraft worker Corky Jones in *Wings for the Eagle* (1942).



20. Bette Davis and Paul Lukas as Sara and Kurt Muller in *Watch on the Rhine* (1943).

that the Vichy French are, to some degree, allied with them. However, the greatest threat in *Casablanca* comes from the enemy within. Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), a hardened nightclub owner, struggles to suppress his past as a romantic freedom fighter and maintain a cynical detachment from his customers and their politics. When an old love turns up with her husband, who is a famous member of the Resistance, Rick refuses to help the couple escape the Nazis. Rick eventually realizes that the problems between him and his lost love Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) “don’t amount to a hill of beans” in a war-torn world, and he ultimately sacrifices his own happiness so that Ilsa and her husband can escape to freedom in America. *Casablanca* is likely so well remembered because it skillfully weaves its message of sacrifice in wartime with a timeless love story.

The Home Front category presented the greatest opportunity to combine Jack and Harry’s personal and professional war against fascism. Home Front films employed the stories of patriotic Americans to inspire the viewing public. All profits from *This Is the Army*, based on the successful stage show by Irving Berlin, were donated by Warner Bros. to the Army Emergency Relief Fund. *Yankee Doodle Dandy* starred James Cagney as George M. Cohan in this film about the life of the patriotic American composer/performer who penned “Yankee Doodle Boy” and “Over There.” The film begins with Cohan receiving a Medal of Honor from President Roosevelt. It was the first time a living president was portrayed by an actor in a film. Since Roosevelt received many requests by studios to use his image in a film, Roosevelt likely agreed to be portrayed in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* thanks to his friendly relationship with Jack and Harry Warner. Proceeds from the premiere of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* were donated by Warner Bros. to purchase war bonds to build ships.

In addition to the millions Jack and Harry donated to the war effort, Warner Bros. employees regularly donated up to 10% of their paychecks to purchase war bonds. Warner Bros., along with the other Hollywood studios, produced war bond shorts and advertised war bonds in many of their print ads until the end of the war.

Jack and Harry Warner had been dedicated to the defeat of fascism since Hitler took power in Germany in 1933. They recognized the power of motion pictures to influence popular attitudes and worked to utilize their position as media moguls to bring to light what they considered to be a very real threat to American freedoms. Consistent

21. Sen Young embodies “The Enemy” in *Across the Pacific* (1942).



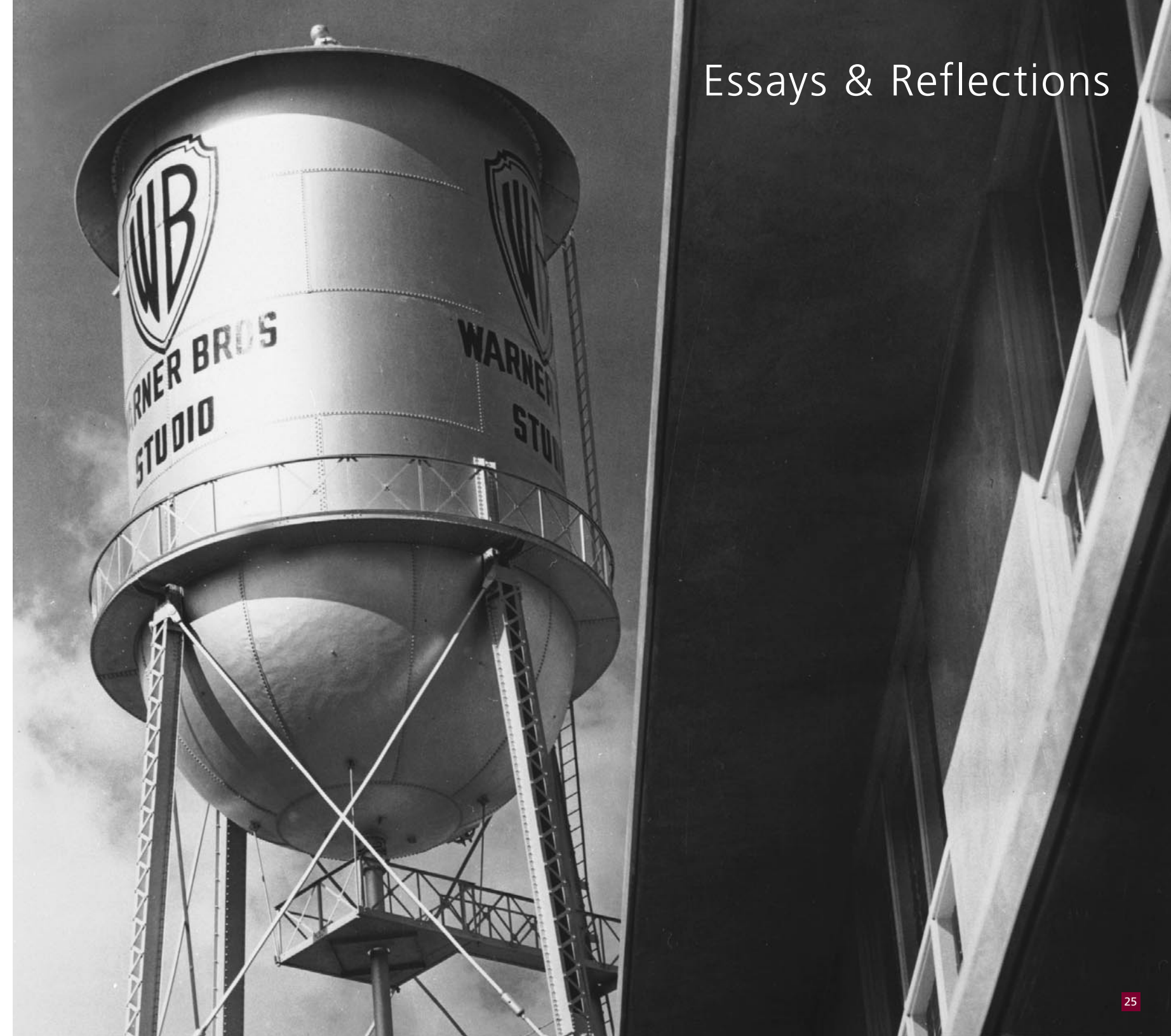
offers to help the Roosevelt Administration in any way possible led to the establishment of the First Motion Picture Unit, which would produce hundreds of shorts to aid the war. The complex web of films they produced, both before and during the war, pushed the boundaries of important issues like racism and the role of popular film in society, leaving as the Warners' legacy some of the most important films of the period. Harry's personal dedication to the cause earned him the respect and admiration of his employees and colleagues, and Jack's active supervision of wartime production won him a Medal for Merit. The Warners' personal war against the spread of Nazi fascism also earned them an important place in the history of the intersection between politics, popular culture and propaganda.

#### NOTES

1. Nazi Data Files. Jack L. Warner Collection, School of Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California.
2. Letter from Doris (Warner) Leroy to Harry Warner, undated. Jack L. Warner Collection, School of Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California.
3. Letter from Harry Warner to Sam Katz at Metro Goldwyn Mayer, June 27, 1939. Jack L. Warner Collection, Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California.
4. Letter from Harry Warner to Franklin Roosevelt, July 23, 1941. PFF 1050, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.
5. The cartoon transcript in the USC Warner Bros. Archives does not contain the reference to Pretzel, Germany. For a description of the cartoon see Jerry Beck, *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies: A Complete Illustrated Guide to the Warner Bros. Cartoons*. (New York: H. Holt, 1989), 22.
6. See Christine Ann Colgan, "Warner Bros.' Crusade against the Third Reich: A Study of Anti-Nazi Activism and Film Production, 1933-1941," diss., University of Southern California, 1985 for a wide sampling of films dealing with issues of race and religion. Also see Leo Braudy's essay in this book for a discussion of titles that obliquely address the war in Europe.
7. *Black Legion* (Warner Bros., 1936), Production Code Administration. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
8. Frank S. Nugent, "Second Thoughts on *Black Legion*," *New York Times*, January 24, 1937. *Black Legion* Publicity, File 691, Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California.
9. As quoted in Colgan, 270.
10. *Sons of Liberty*, *Flag of Humanity* and *Lincoln in the White House*, along with the Warner Bros. animated short *Old Glory*, were screened continuously during the exhibition. Many thanks to Leith Adams at the Warner Bros. Corporate Archive for arranging to have the shorts made available.
11. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Pressbook, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.

12. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Correspondence, File 12508, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.
13. For a lengthy discussion of *Sergeant York* see Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
14. Birdwell, 160.
15. Birdwell, 159.
16. Harry Warner, "Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Interstate Commerce," United States Senate, September 25, 1941.
17. Letter from Jack Warner to Lowell Mellett, November 10, 1942, PFF 1050, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.
18. *Dive Bomber* was retroactively categorized by Warner Bros. as an "Armed Forces" film. It was not uncommon for early films to be identified by the categories later established by the Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures.
19. See Dana Polan in this book for a discussion of the heroic narrative, especially in *Destination Tokyo*.
20. *Mission to Moscow*, Correspondence, File 2085, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.
21. *Mission to Moscow*, Publicity, File 684, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.
22. Depicting the enemy in a standing position, with a cigarette hanging from the lips, was visual shorthand for identifying the enemy. Publicity photos for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *Across the Pacific* and *Edge of Darkness* all use the same visual device. See masterphotos for each title at the Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California.

22. The Warner Bros. iconic water tower. ►



## Essays & Reflections