Sometimes a single movie can awaken the political consciousness of a nation. The opening of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 ignited protests and heated debates throughout the country. Twenty-four years later, the opening of Warner Bros.’ *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, the first film to portray Nazis as a threat to America, sparked equally passionate responses. “The evening of April 27, 1939,” declared film critic Willard Reynolds, “will go down in screen history as a memorable one. It marked the first time in the annals of screen entertainment that a picture ever really said something definite about current events, really took sides and argued for the side with which it sympathized.” In an emotional memo to Jack Warner, producer Lou Edelman proudly told his boss, “Last night, the motion picture had a Bar Mitzvah. It came of age. It said, ‘Today I am a man.’ *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was proud of what it had to say and how it said it, and the world was very articulate in its approval, and compliments to the courage that it took to say it.”

Not everyone was enamored with the film. Nazi sympathizers in Milwaukee burned down the local Warner Bros. theater shortly after the movie opened. Angry citizens in other cities picketed theaters, slashed seats and threatened exhibitors. In Poland, anti-Semitic audiences hanged several theater owners in their movie houses for exhibiting the film. Nazis banned the film everywhere they could exert pressure. For many people, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was more than just another movie.

Today, six decades after Pearl Harbor, it is easy to talk nostalgically about World War II as the “Good War,” a war where the forces of “good” and “evil” were seemingly easy for Americans to identify. Although recent films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998) reminded audiences of the horrors of that war, they never questioned the wisdom of American involvement. But in the mid 1930s, the real horror for politically engaged citizens was how few people wanted to hear about the lurking dangers of fascism or the threats posed by the expansionist policies of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco.

*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was a milestone in American cinema. It was the first major studio production to take an explicit stand on foreign policy and warn Americans about the dangers of a particular regime. Film scholars refer to the 1930s as the “Golden Age of Hollywood,” a time when films were at their lavish best. But the 1930s were also the decade when Hollywood emerged as a major force in the nation’s political life. Movie stars used their celebrity to bring attention to the dangers posed by fascists abroad and at home. Although anti-fascist celebrities were able to reach tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Americans, politically engaged filmmakers wanted to reach millions. And no movie moguls were more committed to fighting fascism than Harry and Jack Warner. At a time when few studios were willing to jeopardize lucrative foreign sales, the Warner brothers produced a slew of highly politicized anti-fascist films: *Black Legion* (1937), *Juarez* (1939), *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *Espionage Agent* (1939), *British Intelligence* (1940), *Sea Hawk* (1940), *Underground* (1941) and *Ivanhoes* (1941).
This article examines the events that led to the making of Confessions of a Nazi Spy and the variety of reactions to it. It draws on semi-autobiographical statements of propaganda in motion picture before and after World War II—investigations that set a chilling warning throughout the motion picture industry about the dangers of political activism.

The Rise of Anti-Fascist Hollywood

The 1930s did not mark the beginning of political activity in Hollywood. From the opening of the first nickelodeon in 1905, movies and movie stars did more than simply entertain. A pre-code film represented a new means of political communication for a new century, a dangerous, and what many authorities regarded as a revolutionary, means of communication that spoke directly to millions of Americans. Although early films dealt with a wide variety of contentious political issues, movie stars generally avoided the political spotlight. Studio executives, noted Charlie Chaplin’s one-time assistant, feared that if an actor took sides in any matter, he was bound to alienate a portion of his public. And that was bad, as (theater magnate) Sid Grauman would have said, for the old box offices.

Celebrity attitudes toward political changes in the 1930s as the devastating effects of the Great Depression, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the rapid spread of fascism in Europe poli-

cized Americans and generated an unprecedented era of Hollywood activism. As conditions at home and abroad worsened, movie industry personnel began to question their responsibility as citizens to stand up for ideas and causes they believed in, or against forces they felt threatened American democracy. Given the large numbers of Jews, European émigrés, liberals and radicals that populated Hollywood in the 1930s, it is not surprising that anti-fascism emerged as the focal point of political action.

Hatred of fascism led Hollywood liberals, communists and some Republicans to organize a wide range of progressives “Popular Front” groups—the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (formed in April 1936), the Motion Picture Artists’ Anti-Nazi League (which had 15,000 members at its peak) and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugees Committee. The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, whose leaders included Melvyn Douglas, Frederic March, Paul Muni, James Cagney, Sylvia Sidney and Gloria Stuart, had an estimated 4,000 members and mounted frequent demonstrations, sponsored weekly radio shows, published their own newspaper and blocked meet-

gings of the Los Angeles Anti-Nazi American Bund. “There is hardly a town party today,” Ellis Wertheimer wrote in January 1938, “as a cocktail gathering, a studio-lunch table or dinner even at a producer’s house at which you do not have heated discussion, talks of ‘freedom’ and ‘suppression,’ talk of the Treaty of Versailles, of war, of world economy and political theory.”

Hollywood’s actors, writers, directors and producers were at the forefront of internationalist politics at a time when most Americans were still isolationists. In November 1936 simple statements like “Hitler and his Fascists are opposed to the United States” and “All Americans are opposed to United States participation in any potential war.” Three years later, a Gallup poll found that 62% of the public thought it more important to investigate American war propaganda than to investigate the spread of Nazism, fascism or communism in America.

The Warner Brothers and the Rise of Anti-Fascist Cinema

Committed anti-fascist filmmakers knew they had to reach millions of Americans who hoped to understand anti-fascism. Consequently, off-screen political activities were accompanied by on-screen activi-
ties. Harry and Jack Warner were the unspoken leaders of the anti-fascist cinematic crusade. No studio moguls were more devot-
edly anti-fascist and willing to put their money on the line than the Warner brothers. As Jack told a reporter in August 1936, studios “should strive for pictures that provide something more than a mere pass; the Jews will still be there.” As late as August 1939, just one month prior to the Nazi invasion of Poland, Zuckor told a reporter, “I don’t think that Hollywood should approve of any picture that presents but emo-
tionality. The newsreels take care of current events.”

During the early 1930s, Warner Bros. produced scores of social prob-
lem films dealing with domestic ills caused by the Great Depression. By the mid 1930s, they turned their attention to foreign dangers and set out to use the screen to alert the nation against demo-
cracy. But they were constrained by Hollywood’s self-censorship board, the Production Code Administration (PCA), and its anti-Semitic head, Joseph Breen, from making overtly anti-fascist films or mocking foreign governments. Breen did little to hide his anti-Semitism. As late as August 1936, he complained that “the Jews will still be there.” As late as August 1939, just one month prior to the Nazi invasion of Poland, Zuckor told a reporter, “I don’t think that Hollywood should approve of any picture that presents but emo-
tionality. The newsreels take care of current events.”

The brothers soon figured out a way to get around Code restrictions: They would make obliquely anti-fascist movies based on real events. Black Legion, which opened in New York in 1936, was based on the true story of a domestic fascist organization that wrought murder and terror throughout the Midwest during the early 1930s. Reviewers easily grasped its message. “The tumult comic...”, wrote the Los Angeles Times, “which has featured with a couple of quick lefts and then run every time it has tangled with an anti-fascist theme, finally has landed a solid, substantial blow. In Black Legion...” Warner Bros. followed Black Legion with a series of historically-based films that exposed audiences to past incidents of tyranny, injustice and anti-Semitism. They Won’t Forget (1937) told how pacifist led
The Nazi spy case was broken by G-man Leon G. Turrou, who serialized his story in the New York Post and then released it as a best-seller, Nazi Spies in America (1938). Seeing this as a golden opportunity to make a film about the dangers of Nazism, the Warners immediately bought the rights to his story. In October, Jack Warner wrote to Turrou that they were ready to depart from the pleasant and profitable course of entertainment to engage in propaganda, to produce screen portrayals arousing controversy, conflict, racial, religious and nationalistic antagonism and outright, horrible human hatred. Making this film, Lischka concluded, ‘will be one of the most memorable, one of the most lamentable mistakes ever made by the industry.’

Unable to persuade them with financial appeals, PCA censors tried haranguing the film on the grounds that it violated Code provisions which stipulated that ‘the history, institutions, prominent people and citizenship of other nations shall be represented fairly.’ As Lischka complained in January 1939, ‘To represent Hitler only as a screaming madman and a bloodthirsty persecutor, and nothing else, is manifestly unfair, considering his phenomenal public career, his unchallenged political and social achievements and his position as head of the most important continental European power.’

Walter Breen, forged ahead, refusing to bend under pressure from the PCA or their studio brethren. As Jack explained several months later, ‘Warner Bros. forged ahead, refusing to bend under pressure from the PCA or their studio brethren. As Jack explained several months later, “as we are concerned,” Paramount Pictures executive Luigi Luraschi wrote Breen in December 1938, “our policy at the moment is that we do not intend to heed them. We produced the “Nazi Spy” picture because we believed first, that it would supply dramatic entertainment and second, because we felt it exposed conditions concerning which the Warners really wanted to do was alert the nation to the danger Hitler posed to democracy at home and abroad. They found their answer in early 1938.

The Making of Confessions of a Nazi Spy

On February 26, 1938, FBI head J. Edgar Hoover announced that the Bureau had uncovered and dismantled a Nazi spy ring operating in the United States that included members of the German-American Bund. Unfortunately, the publicity-seeking Hoover’s remarks came before all the spies had been arrested—most prominently Dr. Ignatz Greibl, leader of the American Nazis, who managed to escape back to Germany. In June 1938, eighteen individuals were indicted in a New York federal court and charged with violating U.S. espionage laws. The trial, which received tremendous national coverage, began in October and ended with the conviction of four spies in November (fourteen others managed to flee beforehand) and their sentencing on December 2, 1938.

The Nazis who were tried at the trial featured any actors who appeared in Confessions of a Nazi Spy. A new film would be one of the most memorable, one of the most lamentable mistakes ever made by the industry.

German Consul General in Los Angeles, called on PCA head Joseph Breen to stop the film from being made. Greibl threatened that the Reich would ban all subsequent productions that featured any actors who appeared in Confessions of a Nazi Spy. Rural studio leaders were worried that Warners’ anti-fascist campaign would lead the German government to ban all American films. Given that many studios earned 40-50% of their revenues from foreign markets, this was a dire prospect. “So far as we are concerned,” Paramount Pictures executive Luigi Luraschi wrote Breen in December 1938, “our policy at the moment is that we will not attempt to make any picture that will be obviously uncomplimentary to any nation abroad.”

The Warners also encountered fierce opposition from PCA censors who repeatedly warned them that Confessions of a Nazi Spy would cost them money and do irreparable harm to the film industry. “It is our thoughts,” Breen wrote Jack Warner in December 1938, “that (censorship) boards in a number of foreign countries will not be disposed to approve the exhibition of a picture of this kind.” After reading an earlier version of the script, PCA official Karl Lischa asked in January 1939, “Are we ready to depart from the pleasant and profitable course of entertainment, to engage in propaganda, to produce screen portrayals arousing controversy, conflict, racial, religious and nationalistic antagonism and outright, horrible human hatred?” Making this film, Lischa concluded, “will be one of the most memorable, one of the most lamentable mistakes ever made by the industry.”
WARNERS’ WAR: POLITICS, POP CULTURE & PROPAGANDA IN WARTIME HOLLYWOOD

The Movie and Its Reception

A number of actors who were politically committed to making the film. Director Anatole Litvak and actor Paul Lukas were anti-fascist German émigrés; actor Josef Goebbels (Martin Kosleck) that national socialism will now conquer and that no German-American Bund leader Fritz Kuhn filed a $5 million indictment of the Nazi regime is propaganda,” observed the

The film intersperses news events in the United States and Europe, the film intersperses news

In the next scene, we see Dr. Karl Kassel (played by Paul Lukas) addressing a German-American theater in an armored car under heavy police guard. The fear of being dangerous and the studio received so many threatening letters after

The Warners' goal was to reach beyond the physical confines of Hollywood and bring their message to the entire U.S. spy network. Unfortunately, Kasich and many of his spies escape the FBI and flee back to Germany.

The final portion of the film focuses on the courtroom trial of the four spies who were brought into custody and charged with treason. These scenes show them that the better.” As Renard turns to Kellogg and proudly

The message works with Renard and Kellogg having a cup of coffee in a diner. Customers come in and discuss the final outcome of the trial. “There’s one thing they (Nazis) found out here,” says one ordinary Joe, “that’s not a city which is predominantly German and Pennsylvania Dutch,” who speaks on behalf of the Warners lambasts isolationists for their

Kassel and many of his spies escape the FBI and flee back to Germany. The film ends and the credits roll.

As one reporter revealed, numerous studios “secretly warned the German government filed official objections with Secretary of State Cordell Hull denouncing the film as pernicious propaganda that

Kassel and many of his spies escape the FBI and flee back to Germany. The film ends and the credits roll.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy employs a docudrama style to give it a sense of verisimilitude. The film speaks of the month that hit the popular March of time newsreels. The narrative structure is clear: the recent uncovering of a Nazi spy ring and proceeds to describe the events leading to the capture and subsequent trial of the spies. The film opens when Kass

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When told by one studio owner that anti-fascist movies might hurt every American and every free man everywhere should be informed.” We need to “make the

Liga’s birthday party for Lionel Barrymore on opening night and ordered all strongly opposed the Warners' propaganda picture, threw a “surprise”

The theater in an armored car under heavy police guard. The fear of being dangerous and the studio received so many threatening letters after

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Among the films that contributed to this pro-American propaganda effort was Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939). Directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Boris Karloff as a German espionage agent working in the United States, the film was an allegory denouncing the rise of fascism and totalitarianism. When the original script was submitted to the studio’s Production Code Administration (PCA) for approval, it received a list of objections, including issues with the depiction of Germans, the use of the word “Jew,” and criticisms of historical accuracy. Despite these challenges, the film was released in August 1939, coinciding with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, and was intended to encourage political action in the face of the growing threat of fascism.

The Warner Bros. release of Confessions of a Nazi Spy highlighted the studio’s commitment to producing anti-fascist films during World War II. The studio produced a series of films that were characterized by their depictions of German aggression, the brutality of the Nazi regime, and the importance of American preparedness and resistance. One such film was Escape, released in 1940, which told the story of a German spy working as a butler in the home of the British premier at the end of World War I. The film featured a scene in which a German officer tells a clumsy corporal named Adolf that “You’ll be the ruination of Germany some day.”

While Audience response may have been mixed, but industry reaction was not. Fearing the disastrous financial impact anti-fascist films might have on the European market following the outbreak of war, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association led by the city’s German Vice Consul, signed a petition calling on the city censors to ban the film. In other cities, as noted earlier, movie houses showing Confessions were picketed, exhibitors threatened and in some cases violence erupted, causing a number of exhibitors to refuse to show the film.

The Warner brothers also received angry letters from people who objected to what they saw as a biased portrayal of Germany. “I call the picture gross Jewish propaganda,” wrote a St. Louis resident in June 1939. “You did not hurt anyone but you will have more people hating the Jews because a Jew produced it to show his hatred….Shame Shame Shame.” Promising that she would boycott this and all films made by Warner Bros., a Roth of Brooklyn wrote movie industry head Will Hays, “The Aryans, Americans, are not fooled by you and your Jewish propaganda.” A St. Louis resident wrote in June 1939, “You did not hurt anyone but you will have more people hat ing his opposition to its blatant attack on Hitler’s regime. “There is indicated throughout the story a ruthless brutality on the part of the Nazi regime, and a complete absence of anything suggestive of freedom of speech. It is indicated that the German people, under the Nazi government, are subject to the brutal domination of an arrogant group of cheap politicians, masquerading as statesmen.”

As Joseph Breen predicted, Confessions was banned everywhere the Nazis could exert pressure. By August 1939, a month before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the film was prohibited in Germany, Italy, Japan, Holland, Norway and Sweden. During the next year, it was banned in eighteen more countries.

The studio also released two allegorical attacks on fascism and totalitarian rule. See Here!, which opened in August 1940, portrayed Spanish King Philip as an earlier Hitler and Queen Elizabeth as the Winston Churchill of her time. In See No Evil, which premiered in March 1941, Edward G. Robinson played the tyrannical Captain Wolf Larson as “a Nazi in everything but name.”

Once the PCA ban was lifted in January 1940, several other studios, perhaps inspired by the efforts of Warner Bros., began releasing films critical of Nazi Germany and American isolationism. Louis B. Mayer, who as late as June 1939 tried to curry favor with the German govern ment by hosting a group of Nazi newspaper editors on the MGM lot (“I couldn’t believe it,” Harry Warner wrote a friend), tried to mend his ways the next year by turning out The Mortal Storm, Flight Command and Escape. Other productions released in 1940 included Four Sons (Fox), I Married a Nazi (Fox) and Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator (United Artists).
公屋 consciousness by creating visual metaphors that came to dominate the media. Not that the Americans who viewed these films thought of Nazis, what was the first set of images that came to mind—kind and harmless, or evil and dangerous? The Warner brothers used the medium of film to awaken an isolationist nation to the dangers posed by foreign powers. Speaking to a gathering of 5,800 Warner employees on June 5, 1940, Harry urged his motion picture brothers to fight for civil rights and against what many viewed as a “bad war” in Vietnam.

**NOTE**

1. Hollywood Spectator, March 31, 1939; Leo Edelbaum to Jack Warner, April 28, 1939, Correspondence: Folder 1, Production Files, Confessions of a Nazi Spy, Warner Brothers Archives, University of Southern California (hereafter, WBA).

2. Joseph Breen to Will Hays, August 22, 1939, PCA Files, WBA.


4. Harry Crocker, "Heritage Films: Man and Movie," unpublished manuscript, chapter 15, p. 15, Harry Crocker Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA (hereaf-

5. After World War II, a rabidly anti-communist Congress quickly forced all other stars: Going public with even modest liberal politics was likely to endanger, if not ruin, a career. Not until the 1960s would a highly politicized Hollywood once again rise to fight for civil rights and against what many viewed as a “bad war” in Vietnam.