

War of the Films: A Comparative Analysis of World War II Propaganda Film

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Faculty Introduction

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This fascinating paper deconstructs wartime propaganda through the use of film documentaries in Nazi Germany and the United States during World War II. The work examines the purposes, strengths, and weaknesses of propaganda through film. These well-received documentaries created an imaginative, historical database designed to conjure images of stoicism, pride, resentment, anxiety, and fear in the minds and hearts of the nations' citizenry. According to the paper's author, the films rationalized the wartime aims of these governments through the rhetoric of loyalty, half-truths, and lies for the purpose of touting democracy, citizenship, and humanity. Through an array of sources, including documentaries and books on World War II home-front life and culture and propaganda, Benjamin Howard sheds light on an important war weapon that helped shaped American and German wartime aims and popular opinion and culture during World War II.

Abstract

Propaganda has existed for much of human history, but during World War II and the advent of mass media, it became much more prevalent. Because of this, the war became not just a war fought with men and weapons, but with words and ideas. This research paper was written to dissect and compare these ideas by analyzing both German and American propaganda. This paper highlights the similarities and differences between both canons of films and how the depictions of ideals and people within them fit within the context and reality of the war and the world. For research, films from both countries were viewed and analyzed and supportive material about the motivations and goals of the creators, including executive orders, reference materials, and laws, were used. Further research can be conducted by including more films from more countries and other periods. Ultimately, future research can help provide a way to identify and combat propaganda and false information.

As World War II (WWII) raged across Europe and the Pacific, the United States, Germany, and their respective allies fought with guns, tanks, and planes. While this conventional war took place, another kind of fighting occurred on the home front: a propaganda war. In this war, both Americans and Germans vied to motivate men and women to mobilize behind the war effort and demonstrate how they planned to shape the postwar world. On the one hand, the United States trumpeted the ideas of freedom, equality, and the defense of civilization, while Germany sounded the drums of totalitarianism, cultural and national honor, and racial superiority. By viewing wartime propaganda films, observers can use these themes to gain a better understanding of the war itself, the purpose and methods of propaganda, and how it continues to affect the world to this day.

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Propaganda is the use of words, images, and other forms of expression or media to change the opinions of others. A key component of the term is the information is of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a particular point of view. Propaganda can be traced to Ancient Greece, when Greek-city states used events such as plays, speeches, and poems to express the superiority of their culture and ideas. Even art and public buildings have been used by many cultures to sway public opinion and promote ideas. Despite this age-old tradition, propaganda did not reach into the popular consciousness until the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. This newfound consciousness was due to advances in media that made the mass production of propaganda worthwhile, especially during WWII when nations used film in their attempts to sway the masses.¹

Why We Fight: The American Film Industry

With the entry of the United States into WWII, the United States Government quickly realized the need to broadcast their ideas to combat the effects of Nazi propaganda. To do this, two parallel systems were created for the effort. The first, which ran through the Office of War Information, was started by an executive order by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on June 13, 1942 and took on several responsibilities

¹ Mark Dziak, "Propaganda," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2017, accessed December 12, 2019.

regarding the creation and distribution of media and information related to the war effort.² While they could not control what these films said, they could leverage the power of the federal government to influence them. This was done primarily using documents, like the Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry.³ The Office of War Information used famous film directors, such as John Huston and William Wyler, and relied upon the work of many active servicemen filming much of footage for themselves (in *Thunderbolts*, for example, cameras fitted onboard P-47 fighter-bombers were used to capture real-life footage of the bombing campaign in Northern Italy).⁴ This work resulted in films targeting civilians either to mobilize them for the war effort or to inspire them into recruitment.

While not completely independent, the second of these efforts was initiated primarily by United States Army Chief of Staff George Marshall and Hollywood director Frank Capra. George Marshall realized that the lecture series given to incoming recruits and draftees proved ineffective, especially when compared to the indoctrination of the Nazi regime. To counter this, he enlisted the help of Frank Capra, a famous film director turned United States Army Major, to make a documentary series explaining the causes and reasons for United States entry into the war. These films would become the seven films of the *Why We Fight* series.⁵

Within the canon of American WWII propaganda, several themes can be found. The most common of these were the themes of freedom from tyranny, universal equality, and the role of the United States in protecting civilization. In addition to illustrating these themes, the Office of War Information suggested that these films also discuss a variety of other topics related to the war such as reasons for entry, information about whom and with whom the United States fought, and how individuals could aid the war effort.⁶

² Exec. Order No 9182. 7 Fed. Reg. 4468 (June 16, 1942).

³ US Office of War Information, Bureau of Motion Pictures, Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942).

⁴ *Thunderbolts*, directed by William Wyler and John Sturges, 44 minutes (Monogram Picture Corporation, 1947).

⁵ Peter C. Rollins, "Birth of a Film Genre," *World & I*, June 1995, 64.

⁶ Bureau of Motion Pictures, "The Framework of the Government Information Program."

Of all the themes and ideas found within American WWII propaganda, the idea of freedom from tyranny is the most prevalent. In the Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry, the Office of War Information highlighted Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech as an example of what films could show, citing freedom of speech, religion, from want, and fear.⁷ Among these freedoms, religion is used predominantly. In *The Negro Soldier*, the film uses a preacher giving a sermon to his congregation about the importance of the war and why African Americans should fight in it.⁸ *Prelude To War* continues this trend by making references to phrases of peace found in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.⁹ Furthermore, directors also used famous Americans as an avenue to discuss the idea of freedom. In both *Why We Fight: Prelude to War* and *The Negro Soldier*, historical figures such as George Washington and Crispus Attucks, respectively, are used to point to the idea that the United States has always fought for freedom.¹⁰ Both movies also used religious references and iconology to further the idea of freedom. By contrast, Nazi Germany had severe restrictions imposed on faith-based discussions.

Similar to the idea of freedom, the theme of universal equality is also found within American propaganda. *The Negro Soldier* stands out, as its goal was to increase African American enlistment into the Armed Forces and put forth that the United States has been a protector of the rights of the underprivileged.¹¹ This equality also extends to the allies of the United States. Several films within the *Why We Fight* series focused on member nations of the Allies and how they have every right to exist in a system that treats all nations fairly. *Why We Fight: The Battle For Russia*, for example, uses Russian history and the surprise invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941 to demonstrate how they are oppressed people fighting for their rights.¹² *Prelude to War* also demonstrates this theme by

⁷ Bureau of Motion Pictures, "The Framework of the Government Information Program."

⁸ *The Negro Soldier*, directed by Stuart Heisler (United States Department of War, 1944).

⁹ *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*, directed by Frank Capra (United States Department of War, 1942).

¹⁰ *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*; and *The Negro Soldier*.

¹¹ *The Negro Soldier*.

¹² *Why We Fight: The Battle of Russia*, directed by Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak. (United States Department of War, 1943).

contrasting the American ideals and equality with the Nazis' stated ideas on the racial supremacy of the Aryan race and their desire to conquer the world.¹³

Themes of freedom and universal equality give rise to ideas involving the United States' role in international politics and its role as the protector of civilization. In *Prelude to War*, the analogy of the Allied nations being "the free world" and the Axis nations being "the slave world" is evident. The film goes on to explain that only by defeating the nations of the Axis completely and unconditionally, can the free and civilized world be protected.¹⁴ It is also important to note that great effort was put in making this a defensive war, which placed the blame for starting the war on the Axis, primarily the Japanese. *Know Your Enemy: Japan* cites the 1931 invasion of China by Japan as the start date for the war.¹⁵

Triumph of the Will: The Nazi Film Industry

The propaganda of Nazi Germany developed under the auspices of the Ministry of Propaganda and its minister Joseph Goebbels. On November 1, 1933, Nazi Germany issued a decree establishing the Reich Chamber of Culture. This decree gave the Ministry of Propaganda control over the film

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industry. Unlike the United States and the Office of War Information, this control was total; any type of art, radio, or media created in Germany had to go through Goebbels and his Ministry of Propaganda.¹⁶ With this power, Goebbels made many decisions involving propaganda film; actors, writing, sets, and production.¹⁷ Early Nazi forays into propaganda films were initially not very successful with the German population. As noted by William Shirer, German viewers found the initial propaganda

¹³ *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*.

¹⁴ *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*.

¹⁵ *Know Your Enemy: Japan*, directed by Frank Capra (United States Department of War, 1945).

¹⁶ *The German Reich and Americans of German Origin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 10-12.

¹⁷ Robert Edwin Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won: Goebbels and the Nazi Media Campaign* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), 259.

films to be too documentarian in style and boring. This backlash led to other, more skilled writers creating more entertaining films.¹⁸ Regardless of the style, the themes remained the same.

While the consolidation of culture under Goebbels made the identification of themes simpler than the more dispersed American

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propaganda, the difficulty for research lies in locating documents supporting the Nazi acceptance of or focus on these themes. As stated by Robert Herzstein in *The War That Hitler Won: Goebbels and the Nazi Media Campaign*, much of the final days of the Nazi Regime

involved destroying documents and evidence of their collective crimes.¹⁹ Despite this, the ideas and themes of totalitarianism, cultural and national honor, and racial superiority can still be gleaned from surviving documents and personal accounts.

Totalitarianism is a very common theme within Nazi propaganda, with the central conceit being the creation of, and adherence to, a cult of personality surrounding Adolf Hitler. An early and influential work was Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Depicting scenes from the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, this film goes to great lengths depicting screaming and adoring crowds following Hitler wherever he goes and showing him as a beloved and respected figure. Also shown are public figures, not only extolling the virtues and greatness of Hitler, but the need for all Germans to listen and obey the Nazi government.²⁰ This idea of obedience is also found in the 1943 film *Titanic*, where a fictional German officer on the famed cruise ship Titanic, obeys all orders and follows all the rules given to him by his superior officer despite his personal misgivings and the orders' obvious flaws.²¹ In *Bismarck*, Otto von Bismarck, the famous and respected Prussian leader credited with the creation of modern Germany, is used to present the idea that Germany needs to

¹⁸ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 247

¹⁹ Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won*, 27-30.

²⁰ *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Reichsparteitag-Film, 1935).

²¹ *Titanic*, directed by Herbert Selpin and Werner Klingler (uncredited). (1943; Tobis Filmkunst).

have a strong, centralized leadership under the command of a single, unyielding leader to be successful. Furthermore, the film also posits Hitler as the successor to the famed Bismarck by making numerous, veiled comparisons of the two.²² The ideas found within *Bismarck*, also lend towards the idea of the Nazis' protection of Germany's cultural and national honor.

The theme of Germany's cultural and national honor is very evident within the whole of Nazi propaganda. *Bismarck* is an ode to the honor of Germany's past and suggests reasons why it needs to be reclaimed. Throughout the film, Bismarck (and by extension Hitler) is the sole person capable and willing to protect German honor from domination by the Austrians and the French.²³ This connection to Germany's past is also found within *Triumph of the Will*, where scenes of adoring crowds and speeches by Nazi officials are interspersed with images of famous landmarks and German cultural events.²⁴ Unfortunately, these ideas of honor lead into the darkest aspect of Nazi policy: their ideas on race and the racial superiority of the "Aryan" race.

A final aspect of Nazi propaganda is the portrayal of German racial superiority over other races, specifically the Jewish people and Eastern Europeans. *National Socialism*, a document about the movement released by the United States Department of State, notes that internal Nazi propaganda was designed to "unite the masses of the people in hatred of certain enemies, designated by such conveniently broad and simple terms."²⁵ The clear example of this theme is the film *The Eternal Jew* by Fritz Hippler. In *The Eternal Jew*, the Jewish people are portrayed as little more than rats and plague, settling within "more civilized" countries and slowly taking control of the wealth and cultural output of the area. Throughout the film, Jewish people are depicted as living in squalor and collecting wealth solely for self-advancement, unlike the good Aryan Germans who care for the collective good.²⁶ This racial superiority is also found within *Titanic*, where the British owners of the ship are portrayed

²² *Bismarck*, directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner (1940; Tobis Filmkunst).

²³ *Bismarck*.

²⁴ *Triumph of the Will*.

²⁵ Raymond E. Murphy et al., *National Socialism* (Washington D.C: Government Printing House. 1943), 61.

²⁶ *The Eternal Jew*, directed by Fritz Hippler (1940; Deutsche Film Gesellschaft).

as concerned only with wealth and self-promotion, the government as corrupt, with both groups failing to hear the concerns of the sole voice of reason within the film, the German officer.²⁷

The War of the Films: Comparing the Themes and Methods

The first comparison to be made is the telling of falsehoods about individuals and misrepresenting groups of people and censorship. While the most obvious and most destructive case for this misrepresentation is *The Eternal Jew*, as it is filled with outright lies and misstatements about the Jewish people, several other examples exist. The American film *Know Your Enemy: Japan* displays a horrific presentation of the Japanese people and their culture, portraying them as backward and uncivilized.²⁸ This idea of telling falsehoods extends to censorship and the hiding of information. *Let There Be Light* depicts American soldiers dealing with the aftermath of WWII and how the war affected their mental state, specifically Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This film also shows how the doctors and nurses treat stress disorders and how the soldiers are taught to overcome their disorder and return to society.²⁹ Because of the nature of its content, the US government censored the film until the 1980s for fear of hurting postwar recruitment efforts and the perceived need to protect the image of the United States Armed Forces during the Cold War.³⁰ Similarly, the 1943 film *Titanic* was also not initially shown to German audiences, as the depiction of people panicking during the sinking of a ship mirrored too closely to the real panic caused by the bombing of German cities by the British and American Air Forces. Also, the original director of the film, Herbert Selpin, was arrested and hung for “anti-war sentiments.”³¹

A second comparison can be made between the intent of the films on the political aims of the war. Although seemingly opposed to each other, the themes of Nazi totalitarianism and American freedom are linked: both extoll the virtues of their respective political systems and present each country’s goals for a post-war world and put important historic and

²⁷ *Titanic*.

²⁸ *Know Your Enemy: Japan*.

²⁹ *Let There Be Light*, directed by John Huston, (United States Department of War, 1946).

³⁰ Vincent Canby, “‘Let There Be Light’, John Huston vs. The Army,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1981.

³¹ Marco Werman, and Alex Gallafent, “The Nazi ‘Titanic,’” *Public Radio International*, April 12, 2012.

contemporary figures on a pedestal. In American films, the founding fathers and other historical Americans connected to the ideas of freedom and progress are presented as trailblazers and models for how people should live. In contrast, the Nazis put forth one man, Hitler, as the idol for the masses. Ultimately, both canons of film present an answer to a problem, with American propaganda stating that it is the responsibility of the United States to lead the war against tyranny and Nazi propaganda saying that external threats can only be met with absolute control and with the protection of a strong leader.

A final comparison between American and Nazi propaganda involves how both often contradict or misrepresent the truth or the context in which they exist. In *Bismarck*, several aspects of the titular character's life in the film differ slightly from reality.

For example, Bismarck's would-be assassin, Ferdinand Cohen-Blind, is portrayed as an "English Jew."

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While he was Jewish, he was German born, and his only connection to England was his family living in London during the time they were exiled from Germany.³² American films were not immune from breaking with reality and distorting the truth. As mentioned previously, many films depicted America as a bastion of liberty and equality. This representation, however, is at odds with the existence of both the internment of Japanese-Americans along the West Coast and the long-standing treatment of African Americans under Jim Crow laws in the South and rampant segregation throughout American society. Attempts were made to minimize this break: *Know Your Enemy: Japan* begins in an attempt to delineate between American citizens of Japanese descent and the Japanese people. *The Negro Soldier* was made in consult with African American leaders and was co-written by Carlton Moss, a famous African American writer and actor.³³ While neither of these actions justifies the society in which they were produced, they do show an attempt to reach out to racial/ethnic minorities and a tepid acknowledgement of the irony of the situation, a situation that called for a "Double V" or victory against the Axis Forces abroad and systematic racism both at home and abroad. Summing it up, The Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry states the grim reality and feelings of those in

³² *Bismarck*.

³³ *Know Your Enemy: Japan*; and *The Negro Soldier*.

charge saying, “the Negroes have a real, a legal, and a permanent chance for improvement of their status under democracy and no chance at all under a dictatorship.”³⁴

Looking Forward: Why This Matters

Apart from the historical context that they provide, there are several other reasons why these films should be analyzed. The first, and possibly most obvious, is that they provide a way of understanding WWII that is uniquely beneficial. These films are ultimately arguments presented by both sides for why they are fighting in the war. *Bismarck* highlights Germany’s historical grievances and a desire for world pre-eminence and *Prelude to War* presents the United States as a protector of civilization.³⁵ These films also present a way to identify and categorize the purpose and methods of propaganda. By using these films and others from various other sources and periods, we can begin to construct a set of data points that we can use to better identify and counter the effects of modern-day propaganda. Propaganda still exists in many forms and the threat that it poses is still very real. For example, documentaries and social media platforms that prey on political partisanship in order to promote certain sociopolitical fringe agendas can cause enormous harm. By studying these films and the context that prompted them, we can learn from history in a way that may help prevent future conflict. ■

³⁴ Bureau of Motion Pictures, “Why We Fight”; and James G. Thompson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 31 January 1942.

³⁵ *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*; and *Bismarck*, directed by Wolfgang Liebeneiner (Tobis Filmkunst, 1940).

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Student Biography

Benjamin Howard is a senior majoring in history at Sam Houston State University with a minor in secondary education. While studying history in a class with Dr. Bernadette Pruitt, he was inspired by his grandmother's stories of life during World War II and his interest in film production. His current project studies the creation of propaganda films and the ideas those films express. Benjamin plans to graduate in the Fall of 2021 and plans to go into public education and begin teaching history at the high school level.