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American Exceptionalism in the Film Industry of the Middle Twentieth Century

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The University of North Georgia
School of Arts and Letters

**American Exceptionalism in the Film Industry
Of the Middle Twentieth Century**

By
Bryan Everett

A Thesis submitted to the Department of History, Anthropology and Philosophy in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
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Abstract

A common theme that pervades America's view of its past is the idea that the American nation is exceptional. The term "American Exceptionalism" encompasses this notion or belief and sees common usage in both popular and scholarly contexts. This work deals with the essential themes of American Exceptionalism as they appear and evolve through the American film industry. Specifically, it follows the film industry through the momentous conflicts of the middle 20th century. Within this context, it examines the role played by the film industry in perpetuating and shaping exceptionalist ideology in the public sphere. Though a relatively new form of media by the middle 20th century, cinema played an integral role in shaping and affecting the opinions of the American public. The control of narrative and information was a crucial factor in fostering and maintaining public support for American engagement in foreign conflicts.

Exceptionalism is a broad and somewhat abstract concept that requires specific definition for any useful analysis. To put it succinctly, American Exceptionalism refers to the idea of American superiority, specifically moral superiority as evidenced through a conception of the world in terms of racial hierarchy, as well as the superiority of American political ideology. Moral superiority encompasses Christian religious ideology and associated virtues such as duty, strength of character, and ethical integrity. Additionally, it involves an understanding of the world in terms of racial hierarchy and America's place as a racially superior agent of paternal guidance for inferior peoples and

nations. Political superiority entails ideas of democratic liberty and laissez-faire capitalism, as well as the notion of America's democratizing mission.

This narrative of America's superiority and exceptionalism extends back beyond the nation's origins and despite the many evolutions experienced in America since, the narrative of exceptionalism persists. This persistent trend continued into the middle 20th century and manifested itself in new and dynamic forms. Exceptionalist ideas were a powerful force that heavily impacted Americans' attitudes and actions during the Second World War. The American film industry of this era provides a very clear example of this. Many works exist on the subject of American Exceptionalism, as well as on the role of ideology in shaping US foreign policy. However, far less scholarship exists on American Exceptionalism in popular culture and media forms, specifically in the film industry. This work traces the presence of exceptionalist ideology as it appears on screen and examines the continuities in the exceptionalist narrative through this era. The ideological narrative varied slightly depending on the group or nationality held in comparison to America. The Hollywood portrayals of Russian, German, and Japanese characters provide the most poignant examples of this.

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Introduction

In a secluded corner of the nightclub that is the backdrop for many scenes in the 1942 film *Casablanca*, Conrad Veidt, playing the German Major Heinrich Strasser, questions the club's owner Rick Blaine; "Mr. Blaine, what is your nationality?" Humphrey Bogart as Blaine meets Strasser's pensive gaze and addresses his prying query: "I am a drunkard."¹ With a tone of self-deprecation Blaine convincingly deflects Strasser and alerts audiences to temper any expectations of heroism from the only American character in the film. The quiet tension and frustration contained in Bogart's line perfectly encapsulated the internal dilemma that plagued his character. Yet Bogart's on-screen struggle represented more than just a plot device, it also brought into question the character of an American nation facing turmoil. Rick Blaine's personal dilemma shed light on ideological principles that resonated with American moviegoers and called into question beliefs that lay at the root of national identity. Bogart let audiences see not just a man but a nation experiencing a crisis of conscience.

As one of the most famous and critically-acclaimed films ever produced in Hollywood, *Casablanca* represents the collaborative efforts of a wide range of individuals. Adapted from an unproduced play *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, its plot, characters, and script passed through numerous hands on its way to becoming the iconic finished product. This film, like so many other of this era, represents a collective of ideals and perspectives that find a certain common ground in the narrative delivered

¹ *Casablanca*. Directed by Michael Curtiz. Released by Warner Brothers Entertainment. 1942. Film.

on screen.² Released by Warner Brothers at the dawn of US deployment into North Africa in 1942, the film unsurprisingly draws attention to this new theater of war. Set in the Moroccan city that lends its name to the title, *Casablanca* features a cross-section of characters whose on screen actions and motives maintain a certain connection to the conflict in Europe as it stood by the early 1940s. Some critics contend that the success of this film and the nuances of its narrative are only incidental. They argue that the film's political undertones are the accidental result of its numerous clichés combining to form something that was never intended.³ However, reflecting back on the filmmaking process years later one of the principal screenwriters and editors Howard Koch advocated for the complete intentionality of every political and ideological parallel.⁴ Incidental or not, *Casablanca* represents a cinematic classic rarely thought of as a vehicle for propaganda. Nevertheless, the film perpetuated very clear narratives about Americans, their allies and their enemies.

Set just before America's official involvement in WWII, many of the film's key scenes unfold at the nightclub owned by American Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart). Rick embodies the many facets of American attitudes toward Europeans and the European war, and at the same time exudes a certain aloofness from the film's other characters. Spurned by a former lover he met in Paris, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), Rick is an

² Aljean Harmetz. *Round Up the Usual Suspects: The Making of Casablanca: Bogart, Bergman, and World War II*. (New York: Hyperion Publishing. 1992), Xiii.

³ James Pontuso. *Political Philosophy Comes to Rick's: Casablanca and American Civic Culture*. (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books. 2005), 79. See also: Eco, Umberto. "Casablanca, or, the Clichés Are Having a Ball." From: *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, eds. (Boston: Bedford Books. 1994), 260- 264.

⁴ Howard Koch and Julius Epstein. *Casablanca: Script and Legend*. (New York: Overlook Press. 1973), 166.

embittered pragmatist. Rick's club sits in the heart of Casablanca. Controlled by the Nazi-supported Vichy French, the city contains a menagerie of international residents: Ugarte the Italian smuggler, Rick's spurned French lover Yvonne, Annina and Jan Brandel the newlywed Bulgarian refugees, Louis Renault the Vichy Captain, Heinrich Strasser the ranking Nazi officer, and Victor Lazlo the Czech resistance leader and Ilsa's husband. The plot centers upon a pair of documents, exit visas that grant their carriers unrestricted passage through Nazi territory and entry in neutral countries such as the United States. Early in the film these passes come into Rick's possession and for the remainder of the film the audience witnesses Rick's moral and emotional dilemma as he re-encounters his former lover Ilsa. When they met in Paris, Ilsa believed that her husband recently died in a Nazi concentration camp. On the eve of rendezvousing with Rick to flee Paris ahead of the Nazi invasion, she learned of Laszlo's escape and departed immediately to meet him without explaining the situation to Rick. Embittered and deeply cynical by the time they meet again in Casablanca, Rick is unwilling to part with the visas despite the clear need for Ilsa and her husband to escape. As an active and well-known resistance leader against the Nazi occupation of his homeland, Laszlo finds his situation in Casablanca quite precarious. Yet it is only after Ilsa explains the circumstances of her sudden abandonment of Rick in Paris that the recalcitrant hero assents to help her husband flee. Led to believe that she will stay in Casablanca, Rick shocks Ilsa when at the final moment he ushers her onto the plane departing for neutral Lisbon to join Laszlo.

Rick's journey in this film is quintessentially American. From his self-sufficient and enterprising character to his detached emotional complexities and rugged swagger,

Rick encapsulates American masculinity and national identity. Through Bogart's character the ideals of political and moral superiority that drive the narrative of exceptionalism parade through many scenes in *Casablanca*. "I stick my neck out for nobody" Rick repeatedly claims as characters throughout the film ask for his assistance. Yet as the plot progresses the audience comes to understand that earlier in his life Rick risked his life to fight the forces of fascism in Ethiopia and Spain. Rick has a storied history of sticking his neck out and standing up for the cause of liberty and democracy. His callused manner instead reflects how his own past, his struggles and interests encumber his outlook on the world. He is sympathetic but disinterested in the trials of the many victims of fascist aggression in Europe that he rubs shoulders with in Morocco. Victor Laszlo points this out as Rick attempts to trivialize and brush off the many problems engulfing the world around him: "You know how you sound, Mr. Blaine? Like a man who's trying to convince himself of something he doesn't believe in his heart." Though not explicitly stated, the audience additionally receives the impression that while Rick is *unwilling* to stand up to the Nazis and their henchmen in the early parts of the film he is fully *capable* of doing so. Next to Rick, the Vichy Captain Renault or the Nazi Major Strasser come across as impotent bullies. Once Rick determines to intervene on behalf of Ilsa and Victor Laszlo he skillfully deceives, manipulates, and uses force to accomplish his goals. The moment Rick adheres to the freedom-loving political moors that the audience knows him to possess he decisively and successfully thwarts his enemies. In the end love triumphs over self-interest and the lovers of freedom against the forces of totalitarianism.

Yet through much of the film Rick hardly resembles a traditional hero. In fact, from a moral perspective Victor Laszlo often outshines and overshadows the protagonist. A key scene in the film takes place at Rick's Café Américain that showcases Laszlo as a man of courage and virtue. While Laszlo unsuccessfully implores Rick to sell him the exit visas, Major Strasser and a handful of German officers hijack the club piano to sing *The Watch on the Rhine*. Though many present including Rick clearly disapprove, it is Laszlo who acts, interrupting the Germans by instructing the club band to play *Le Marseilles*. It is a rousing and patriotic spectacle as nearly all inside Rick's club join the chorus. Though a French anthem, in this scene *Le Marseilles* comes to symbolize something larger as the sundry patrons hailing from France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain all in one voice drown out the singing of the German officers. As the song ends the joyous crowd surrounds Laszlo, shaking hands and clapping him on the back. The scene establishes Laszlo's qualities and capabilities as a man and as a leader, yet more importantly it underscores Rick's place within the larger narrative.

Moments before turning down Laszlo's offer for the visas the audience witnesses Rick going out of his way to help a Belgian couple, without their knowledge, win the money they need after previously denying them his assistance. Then as Laszlo decides to act in the *Le Marseilles* scene, it is Rick who the band members look to before they move to follow Laszlo's request. With an affirmative nod, Rick gives Laszlo and the band his approval to deliberately upstage the Germans. Following the song, the audience again sees the sacrificial nature of Rick's decision as a perturbed Major Strasser orders that the club closed immediately. The sequence of these events provides a

foreshadowing of the sacrificial goodness that Rick secretly harbors beneath his rough exterior. Gradually throughout the rest of the film Rick's true virtues emerge and leave audiences gasping at the depth of commitment and sacrifice that he shows towards people and ideals that he previously treated with indifference. While the film portrays many other characters such as Laszlo as people possessing admirable qualities, only Rick bears the weight of sacrificial altruism. In the film's most climactic scene as Rick persuades Ilsa to join her husband on the plane, he summarizes his special position: "I've got a job to do, too. Where I'm going, you can't follow. What I've got to do, you can't be any part of. Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that." In both large and small-scale dilemmas, the characters in this film turn to Rick for council or aid. He stands apart as one with not only the means but also the will to help rescue and empower others. *Casablanca* sets Rick up as a representation of America, and through his attitudes and actions the audience sees an America that is fiercely self-reliant and independent, almost to a fault, yet also intrinsically virtuous and self-sacrificing.

Thematic narratives such as these play a pivotal role in driving cinematic plot and character development. Yet they also serve a broader purpose though offering fresh meaning and perspective to the world outside of the movie theater. This held true especially through the years preceding and during US involvement in WWII. As millions of Americans struggled to contextualize the conflict and eventually their own place within it, Hollywood reached out with useful frameworks for understanding. Filmmakers

not only gave audiences narrative context for understanding America's place within the conflict but also for America's growing list of enemies and allies as well. In each case, many of the Hollywood films through this era built their plots, characters and sequences upon the foundation of American Exceptionalism.

Literature Analysis

Warily monitored by government agencies, Hollywood writers, producers, and directors faced significant pressure to create titles that delivered an acceptable and truthful message to the American public. The "truth" often took the form of propaganda films quite friendly to government policy and war aims as outlined by government entities. Through many such films the truth rested on the ideological assertions of American Exceptionalism. Proper analysis of any connections between the wartime film industry and the role of ideology demands a broad historiographical approach. Little scholarship exists connecting cinematic narrative to exceptionalist ideology, thus any analytical study must approach certain themes separately.

Scholarship on American Exceptionalism

American Exceptionalism as a concept or an ideology possesses roots going back several centuries, yet the coining of the term and study of it as such is much more recent. Most scholarship on exceptionalism emerged within the last fifty years or so. A handful of works produced during the 1950s represent some of the first influential

commentaries on American history that incorporate clearly exceptionalist interpretations. In *People of Plenty* author David Potter argued in 1954 for an understanding of American uniqueness through its economic abundance.⁵ His thesis centers upon the idea that America was and is exceptional because of its vast territory and abundance of resources which facilitated its unique values and institutions. In 1956 historian Perry Miller published *Errand Into The Wilderness* which examined the evolution of the European, Puritanical vision for the New World into a uniquely American one.⁶ Political scientist Louis Hartz published *The Liberal Tradition in America* in 1955, in which he argued for a connection between America's unique, non-feudal past and its liberal ideology.⁷ In each of these works, the respective authors relied on an interpretation of America's present position based on its unique and exceptional past. Each addressed unique characteristics of America's economic, political, and religious traditions and through this lens sought to explain America's unparalleled position in the present.

Scholarship that examines American Exceptionalism as an ideological construct or that challenges the traditional exceptionalist views of America's past is far more recent. Only within the past twenty-five to thirty years have historians, sociologists, and political scientists begun to critically explore this subject in depth. Many of these more critical and in-depth studies emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Notable among

⁵ David Potter. *People of Plenty; Economic Abundance and the American Character*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2009).

⁶ Perry Miller. *Errand Into the Wilderness*. (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press. 1981).

⁷ Louis Hartz. *The Liberal Tradition in America. An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 1955).

such works are Thomas Hietala's *Manifest Design*, Michael Hunt's *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*, Ian Tyrrell's "Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," Dorothy Ross' *The Origins of American Social Science*, and Seymour Lipset's work *American Exceptionalism; A Double-Edged Sword*.⁸ These works examine the longevity of Exceptionalist ideology and challenge its seemingly subconscious acceptance as an explanation for America's rise to global power. These represent some of the first works that begin to take a more critical approach to interpreting America's exceptional past. While each author draws separate implications and interpretations relevant to their own studies, all agree upon certain characteristics of America's exceptionalism. They all affirm the historical quality of American Exceptionalism and the influence of events and historical trends in shaping and substantiating exceptionalist ideology. Many of these studies also shed light onto specific elements that forged and molded exceptionalist ideology through the centuries. These elements encompass a wide range of factors including racism, universal republicanism, expansionism, laissez-faire capitalism, and religious moralism, to name a few.

The scholarship of the past decade provides even more critical interpretations of such exceptionalist elements and examines the continuity of their influence on

⁸ Thomas Hietala. *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*. (Ithaca NY.: Cornell University Press. 2002). Michael Hunt. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (New Haven CT.: Yale University Press. 2009). Ian Tyrrell. "Exceptionalism in an Age of International History" *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), pp. 1031-1055. Dorothy Ross. *The Origins of American Social Science*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992). Seymour M. Lipset. *American Exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. (New York: W.W. Norton. 1996).

contemporary America. Godfrey Hodgson's *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, Robert Kegan's *Dangerous Nation*, and Donald E. Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism*, all represent studies on the influence of Exceptionalism through different eras of US history.⁹ In many ways, these newer works share many themes of study and interpretation with aforementioned works of the late 20th century. Yet one of the themes present throughout these more recent works that distinguishes them is the idea that American Exceptionalism is a fantasy or at least a thing of the past. It may live on in popular memory, but it exists only in memory if at all. The influential scholarship of the past fifty to sixty years represents a spectrum of interpretation regarding exceptionalism, ranging from affirmative to critical. And while many of these works acknowledge the relationship between exceptionalist ideology and American culture, none specifically address its impact within the Hollywood film industry.

Scholarship on Ideology in Film

From the dawn of its existence, cinema provided a remarkable vehicle for ideology. The continued presence and role of ideology in cinema occupies a pivotal place in the study of film history and theory. As such, a wide body of scholarship exists concerning this subject. Yet few studies examine very specific threads of ideological influence throughout various eras of film production. Richard Maltby's *Harmless entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* and Lane Crothers'

⁹ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. (New Haven CT.: Yale University Press, 2009). Robert Kegan. *Dangerous Nation*. (New York: Vintage, 2007). Donald Pease. *The New American Exceptionalism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Globalization and American Popular Culture stand as examples of scholarship that addresses the ubiquitous presence of ideology in film.¹⁰ Both studies take a broad approach looking at various examples from a wide range of historical eras, and their focus is very technical. From plot devices and character development to set design and script writing, both works offer detailed analysis of the various modes of ideological inundation. Crothers and Maltby not only provide an overview of ideological delivery methods but also examine the impact of ideology in historical films. Additionally, they unpack various ways in which ideology mixed with and influenced popular culture. They conclude that a distinguishable and reciprocal relationship exists between ideological elements that appear in films and those that seem popular and widely accepted throughout society. This relationship between the filmmakers and their audiences proves a recurring theme in many works that examine ideological constructs in cinema.

Other well-known works that examine this subject in a broader context include Philip Rosen's *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*.¹¹ Though rather academic and somewhat inaccessible, this collection of essays offers wide-ranging views from many top film critics that provides a useful framework for understanding the filmmaking process. Thomas Schatz also provides a broad overview of the role played by ideological frameworks in the process of filmmaking in *Hollywood: Cultural Dimensions:*

¹⁰ Richard Maltby. *Harmless entertainment: Hollywood and the ideology of consensus*. (New York: Scarecrow Press. 1983). Lane Crothers. *Globalization and American Popular Culture*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

¹¹ Philip Rosen. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. (New York: Columbia University Press. 1986).

Ideology, Identity and Cultural Industry Studies.¹² Through drawing in and synthesizing a variety of books and essays from a field of experts, Schatz covers a plethora of ideological constructs around subjects such as race, gender, and mass-culture. He then demonstrates the interaction of these constructs with the filmmaking process. Another useful resource on this subject is Barry Langford's *Post-classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology Since 1945*.¹³ Langford offers much more in-depth analysis of specific ideological themes that weave their way into American cinema such as family, gender roles, and patriotism. Although his focus is strictly post-WWII, he draws many useful comparisons and parallels to ideological themes throughout earlier cinematic productions. While these works offer abundant analysis of key ideological elements that appear in film, they do very little to directly address American Exceptionalism as its own distinct ideological construct. Related components such as race, patriotism, or masculinity receive due examination, but few works of film criticism or history combine these elements to analyze exceptionalism in film.

A wide body of research exists concerning the evolution and influence of the film industry through the middle of the 20th century and on the role that ideology plays in the filmmaking process. Yet there is also a distinct body of scholarship that focuses exclusively on WWII-era films, particularly on the propaganda films made during WWII. Hollywood's prolific production of propaganda titles from 1940 to 1945 is

¹² Thomas Schatz. *Hollywood: Cultural Dimensions: Ideology, Identity and Cultural Industry Studies*. (New York: Taylor & Francis Publishers. 2004).

¹³ Barry Langford. *Post-classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology Since 1945*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2009).

unprecedented and unmatched in the industry before or since. Much of this was a direct result of the increased measures of control exercised by government agencies such as the Office of War Information over civilian enterprises and industries. This makes the study of film through this era of interest as it represents a unique period of cooperation and even collaboration between Washington and Hollywood. As such, many historians place this subject in the crosshairs of their research.

Among the more notable works addressing this subject include Robert Fyne's *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*.¹⁴ Fyne's work is far from comprehensive at barely 250 pages in length, yet his bibliography is extensive and his analysis concise. He limits himself to studying rather well-known and big-budget productions and among these only draws out a more extensive analysis on a select handful. Yet through his writing Fyne observes major themes and continuities through the vast majority of WWII propaganda films. He points out the need for propaganda pieces to create an "other," or an "us vs them" dichotomy. He also observes the tendency of propaganda from this era to simplify the attributes and virtues of characters into easily distinguishable and opposing camps. Through the specific productions the he examines, Fyne concludes that these propagandistic devices and narratives proved effective because they resonated with what people already believed or wanted to believe. In this he concurs with other aforementioned film critics that a reciprocal relationship existed between Hollywood and the American public when it came to ideological narrative.

¹⁴ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. 1997).

These key elements characteristic of propaganda films emerge throughout many other works on the subject as well. In *Warner's War: Politics, pop culture & propaganda in wartime Hollywood*, authors Johanna Blakely and Martin Kaplan take a more focused approach to examining WWII propaganda pieces.¹⁵ They specifically identify and analyze the productions of Warner Brother's studios during this period, noting the ways in which even mainstream features carried ideological undertones. Along with Fyne they support the idea of the reciprocal relationship between filmmakers and their audiences concerning propaganda pieces. Historians Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black published a couple of well-known studies on Hollywood's WWII propaganda pieces as well. In their first, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*, Koppes and Black examine the unique dynamics that existed between Hollywood and Washington during the war years. They highlight influential figures and policies and trace the ways in which these contributed to the unique body of cinematic work between 1941 and 1945. In their second, *Hollywood Goes to War: Patriotism, Movies and the Second World War from Ninotchka to Mrs. Miniver*, the two historians delve more specifically into the propagandistic narratives that emerge through mainstream Hollywood productions of the era.¹⁶ Throughout each of these works Koppes and Black echo many of the same themes when it comes to the essential characteristics of propaganda narrative, such as delineation between "us" and "them."

¹⁵ Johanna Blakely, Martin Kaplan. *Warner's War: Politics, pop culture & propaganda in wartime Hollywood*. (Los Angeles: Norman Lear Center Press. 2004).

¹⁶ Clayton Koppes, Gregory Black. *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. (London: Tauris Parke Publishing. 2000). And *Hollywood Goes to War: Patriotism, Movies and the Second World War from Ninotchka to Mrs Miniver*. (London: Tauris Parke Publishing. 2001).

They also note the two-way relationship between filmmakers and their audiences and the unique ways in which films of this era shaped the way that people experienced and understood the war on the home front.

One of the more recent works of scholarship that examines WWII propaganda films seeks also to examine the role of the filmmakers and the myriad of influences that drove them to create their movies. In *Five Came Back* author Mark Harris delivers a fascinating analysis of the relationships between Hollywood and Washington and between the war itself and the men who wrote and directed movies.¹⁷ Harris contends that WWII proved a defining moment in film industry history. He chooses to argue this through examining the lives and work of five key Hollywood directors: John Ford, William Wyler, John Huston, Frank Capra, and George Stevens. He concludes that through their films, these men shaped America's experience during WWII, and conversely that WWII shaped the future of Hollywood. Though Harris does not directly deal with characteristics of propaganda, he very clearly demonstrates the dynamic role that the film industry played through WWII and the crucial relationship between filmmakers and their audiences. These and many other works comprise a solid body of scholarship that examines the characteristics of WWII propaganda as it appeared in Hollywood films. While many delve into an examination of ideological influence, none specifically identify or discuss American Exceptionalism as one such ideology.

Scholarship on "War Films"

¹⁷ Mark Harris. *Five Came Back*. (New York: Penguin Publishing. 2014).

The war or combat film genre is one of the most popular and long-standing in cinematic history. As such, a wide range of scholarship exists on this subject, tracing the endurance and evolution of the genre through the generations. One of the more well-known early works emerged in the mid-1970s when Ivan Butler published *The War Film*, a historical overview that covered major themes and trends in British and American filmmaking from its earliest days until the time of writing.¹⁸ Of interest is Butler's comparison of WWII era film productions. He intimates that the quality of British cinematic productions during this time far exceeded their American counterparts. Using British productions like *49th Parallel* and *Next of Kin* as examples, Butler argues that these films not only possessed superior writing and screenplays, but also proved more effective at boosting British morale. Yet, he counters that what the American film industry possibly lacked in quality they made up in quantity. While Butler's work contains many rather subjective conclusions, he presents a thorough analysis of the history and evolution of the war film that proves quite useful. He also begins to identify certain recurring themes that appear in Hollywood portrayals of war, themes such as patriotism, altruism and masculinity.

Writing a few years after Butler, historian Michael Isenberg published a renowned study entitled *War on Film* in which he traces the origins and evolution of cinematic portrayals of war from 1914-1941.¹⁹ Though he does not deal much with the war films of WWII, his work set the tone for other historical studies on the subject. By

¹⁸ Ivan Butler. *The War Film*. (New York: A.S. Barnes Publishing. 1974).

¹⁹ Michael Isenberg. *War on Film*. (Madison NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1981).

far one of the most influential works following Isenberg's came from film historian Jeanine Basinger who published a study in 1986 that delved more deeply into war films, specifically those inspired by WWII. In *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Basinger profiles a selection of famous and influential combat films set on the battlefields of WWII.²⁰ Her study spans generations as she examines films made anywhere from 1942 to her time of writing. Yet her focus is on demonstrating the evolution of the WWII combat genre into its final form, which she argues takes place between 1942 and 45. She notes that the war-film genre possessed certain conventions going into the WWII years, and observes how many of these began to shift as America became increasingly enmeshed in the conflict. One of the key themes that she contends emerged in the WWII combat film is the "democratic ethic," a virtue that unified otherwise dissimilar American combatants and distinguished them from their enemies. Ultimately, she concludes that the WWII combat film became a genre all to itself rather than a sub-genre, and that the characteristics developed in these films came to influence all subsequent war-films.

This theme of the democratic ethic is not only visible in WWII combat films, but is also traceable through the war-film genre in general. In a more recent book bearing the same title as Butler's, historian Robert Eberwein brings together various essays from film scholars to shed light on the characteristics and elements central in Hollywood portrayals of war.²¹ In his synthesis Eberwein again echoes the pervasive theme of

²⁰ Jeanine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. (Middleton CT.: Wesleyan University Press. 2003).

²¹ Robert Eberwein. *The War Film*. (New Brunswick NJ.: Rutgers University Press. 2004).

democratic virtue. To this he also adds other key themes related to masculinity, triumphalism, and moralism. James Chapman in *War and Film* also examines key elements and themes that weave their way into cinematic portrayals of war.²² Building on the earlier works of Isenberg and Basinger, Chapman seeks to extend the sweep of his study to war-films produced from WWI until the late 1990s. Examining both American and European productions, Chapman's ambitious research traces many similar themes of gender, morality, and virtue. Yet he contends that among war-films few to none address the true complexities of combat and the psychological repercussions that tend to follow. Nevertheless, historians like Chapman and Eberwein draw many conclusions regarding recurrent essential themes that concur with and build upon the writings of earlier scholars.

Additional works on this subject worthy of mention are Peter Rollins and John O'Connor's *Why We Fought*,²³ and Robert McLaughlin and Sally Parry's *We'll Always Have the Movies*.²⁴ Although these works do not take the same analytical approach regarding thematic elements, they do provide a useful synthesis of the genre. In *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History* historians Peter Rollins and John O'Connor compile and edit a vast collection of artifacts from numerous scholars, critics, and historians. Throughout their work, Rollins and O'Connor chronologically trace the

²² James Chapman. *War and Film*. (Islington UK.: Reaktion Books. 2008).

²³ Peter Rollins and John O'Connor. *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History*. (Lexington KY.: University Press of Kentucky. 2008).

²⁴ Robert McLaughlin and Sally Parry. *We'll Always Have the Movies; American Cinema During World War II*. (Lexington KY.: University Press of Kentucky. 2006).

cinematic portrayal of every major American conflict throughout the history of the film industry. Though it possesses limited analysis of films specific to the WWII era, this work offers a well-rounded contextual perspective as it illuminates larger trends in the film industry. In *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*, Robert McLaughlin and Sally Parry explore the products and influence of Hollywood from 1937 to 1945. Though not exclusively devoted to examining war or combat films, the authors do provide a deep wealth of research regarding films produced during the war years, many of which fall into this genre. McLaughlin and Parry adopt a more thematic approach in this work, categorizing films by type and attempting to attach purpose and influence to each.

The works mentioned here do not represent the entire scope of scholarly research and writing on the subject of exceptionalism or of war and ideology as they appear in film. Rather it represents a selection of key works that address recurrent, pervading themes and ideas that define their respective subjects. The consulted resources represent a range of scholarly interpretation, some old and some new, spanning generations of historical thought. Additionally, most take a macro-level approach to their respective subjects, examining themes and trends across extended time periods or else studying a broad sample of artifacts within a more limited period. Taken together these resources provide a valuable cross-section of historical thought and analysis. Yet none of these studies specifically address exceptionalist ideology, as defined by various works on American Exceptionalism, as it manifests itself in the Hollywood productions of the WWII era.

Propaganda

To analyze the ideological payloads contained within the films studied here, a specific understanding of the characteristics and qualities of propaganda is necessary. As a label, propaganda tends to carry pejorative connotations; it especially draws negative attention and reactions from people who perceive themselves as members of freedom-loving, democratic societies. As observed by investigative reporter George Seldes in 1929, Americans possessed a certain degree of wariness towards any blatant attempt at coercion or indoctrination. A well-traveled and bold journalist, Seldes interviewed and wrote critical pieces on foreign dictators and regimes as well as American corporate influence overseas. Reflecting upon a decade and a half of confronting corruption and facing censorship in his journalistic career, in *You Can't Print That!* Seldes noted that many Americans remained averse to the idea of propaganda. He concluded that Americans often associated the term and practice thereof with tyrants and despotic regimes that attempt to bend the public mind to their will.²⁵ Robert Fyne observes in his work that propaganda often appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect of an audience.²⁶ Yet propaganda, especially as it appears in film, often involves a broad range of factors and relies on more than generating emotional reactions. In 1928 public relations strategist Edward Bernays published *Propaganda*, a study centered

²⁵ George Seldes. *You Can't Print That!: The Truth Behind the News, 1915-1928*. (New York: Payson and Clark. 1929), 427.

²⁶Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*. 5.

on the dynamics and development of mass consciousness. Written during an era where Americans first began to experience the influence of the Hollywood film industry and its ability to influence mass opinion, Bernays' observations provide a contemporary perspective on the nature and impact of propaganda. He suggests that an audience's emotional connection is contingent upon an intellectual one, claiming that propaganda serves as a "mechanism" of "an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine."²⁷ According to his logic, the goal of any propaganda piece is to generate consensus of perception. This perception is then tied to narrative, and narrative can serve to advance a particular cause. Propaganda then has little to do with representing narrative facts and events truthfully or falsely and much more to do with representing them in a way that is consistent and uniform.

Viewed in this way propaganda takes on a broader context, and the ways in which Hollywood films carry or disseminate propaganda becomes more complex. Any film made during the era thus comes into question for the ways in which it furthers a consensus of opinion or perception that drives a particular narrative. A widely popular and critically acclaimed film such as *Casablanca* for example, may not traditionally fall into the "propaganda film" category; yet in the perceptions and ideas that the film normalizes one can see its potential as a propaganda piece. The films scrutinized here do not necessarily fall under the same genre or classification, but they nevertheless represent manifestations of propaganda through consensus of perception, ideals, and

²⁷ Edward Bernays. *Propaganda*. (New York: Ig Publishing. 1928), 20.

narrative. While the style and delivery of this propaganda transitioned through the years, the underlying tome of exceptionalist ideology remained at the root of many films of this era.

Origins of Ideology in Film

The American film industry first wielded its influence in 1898 to capitalize on the growing popularity of public interest in war with Spain. Though only in their infancy at the time, production companies in the motion picture industry like Vitagraph quickly realized that the subject of war captured public attention and imagination. Soon after Congress officially declared war in 1898 Vitagraph released *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*, a ninety second silent piece that depicted nothing more than a pair of hands pulling a Spanish flag down from a pole and replacing it with the Stars and Stripes. Devoid of any characters or plot, this very first wartime propaganda film delivered a simple and concise narrative; Spain was America's enemy and as such must succumb to absolute subjugation and surrender.²⁸ The film took advantage of American animosity towards the Spanish and portrayed the prospect of war as quite beneficial and glorious. This heroic portrayal of America and the virtue of combat became the archetype for wartime propaganda.

²⁸ Guy Westwell. *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*. (New York: Columbia University Press. 2006), 11.

With the eruption of WWI in Europe, the American film industry again found incentives for incorporating war-related themes. The pioneering and ambitious J. Stuart Blackton, who involved himself in re-creating many Spanish-American War scenes on film, took to advocating for US military mobilization in 1915. Backed again by Vitagraph, Blackton produced *Battle Cry for Peace*, a silent film that portrayed a horrifying and dystopian future where German armies, unchecked by American readiness for combat, invaded New York. An ardent patriot who kept company with the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Blackton intended to fan the flame of US intervention into the European war. In 1917 he followed this effort with *Womanhood, the Glory of a Nation*, a film that reiterated the belief that US military mobilization and intervention was essential to national security. These films carried unveiled propagandistic themes that portrayed combat as necessary and pacifism or isolationism as untenable and morally bankrupt ideals. Blackton's films proved quite popular, each commanded an audience of over 50 million moviegoers even though there was little consensus among the American population regarding US intervention.²⁹ Upon American declaration of war in 1917, Hollywood directors generated a flood of war-related titles. Many of these carried the familiar trope of earlier propaganda pieces. Films such as *To Hell with the Kaiser!*, *The Hun Within*, and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* all propagated the notion of America's enemy as unilaterally evil and uncompromising.³⁰ Yet other productions from the WWI era took similar themes and packaged them within slightly more complex plotlines and

²⁹ Paul Holsinger. *War and American Popular Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. (Westport CT.: ABC-CLIO. 1999), 197-198.

³⁰ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II. 2.*

characters as well.³¹ Hollywood's inaugural attempt to influence public opinion during WWI proved quite successful, yet it raised several questions concerning the ongoing role of the film industry in American society.

Throughout the early decades of its existence, the film industry in America prompted much debate over its place within society and the classification of its products. Film as a medium of artistic expression and mass communication stood out as new and unique compared to more traditional mediums of still photography and print. As moviegoing audiences grew and the industry expanded it became increasingly clear that films held great value as pieces of public entertainment. Yet this growth precipitated concern over the delineation between films as entertainment pieces versus potential vehicles for indoctrination. Was Hollywood providing mere escapism and amusement, or was it a medium for communicating certain ideologies and doctrines?³² This debate came to a head in a 1915 Supreme Court case over the question of free speech within the film industry. The case pitted the Mutual Film production company against an Ohio state government that put films through review and censorship boards. In a unanimous decision that stood for almost forty years, the Court ruled that: "The exhibition of motion pictures is a business, originated and conducted for profit... not to be regarded... as part of the press of the country or as organs of public opinion."³³ As such, the Court determined that films did not fall under the protection of the First

³¹ Cecilia DeMille Presley and Mark Alan Vieira. *Cecil B. DeMille: The Art of the Hollywood Epic*. (Philadelphia: Running Press. 2014), 11- 12.

³² George Seldes. *You Can't Print That!* 117-118.

³³ Mutual Film Corp. vs. Ohio 236 US. 230, 244 (1915). Quoted in Richard Maltby. *Harmless Entertainment*. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press. 1983), 95.

Amendment. This ruling paved the way for third-party oversight of the film industry and regulation of the content produced. It also relegated films to the realm of “mere entertainment,” or an amusing distraction from the “real” world.

Yet this Supreme Court decision provided a clear stance to the contrary on the question of whether films qualified as mere pieces of entertainment or as something more. While acknowledging that films did not merit the same protections as the press or “organs of public opinion,” in the same ruling the justices conceded that films possessed tremendous potential influence. “They are representations of events, of ideas and sentiments published or known; vivid, useful, and entertaining, no doubt, but capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of their attractiveness and exhibition.”³⁴ The justices saw the great potential of movies to function as vehicles for public influence and indoctrination, for better or for worse. Film offered a powerful means of communication with a vast and growing proportion of the American populace. As such, the Court recognized the benefit to regulating the products of this young industry. Through this ruling the Court poignantly articulated the dual capacity of the Hollywood film industry to disseminate both entertainment and ideology. A brief examination of the early decades of American film production provides numerous examples of this capacity, particularly during times of war.

In the aftermath of WWI, war-films remained popular and attracted large audiences. However, many of these films produced in the 1920s carried different

³⁴ Richard Maltby. *Harmless Entertainment*. 96.

themes regarding the merits of war and heroism of battle. In 1921 MGM released one of the highest grossing films of the decade, a cinematic adaptation of Vicente Ibanez's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. WWI provided the backdrop and the crucial centerpiece to the plot of this romantic drama. The film vividly portrayed how the war heightened the trials and struggles of the central characters, highlighting the human tragedies that accompany war over the glory or glamor of combat.³⁵ In 1925 Metro Goldwin Mayer released *The Big Parade*, one of the most successful productions of the silent-film era. This film followed the life of a rich, young American who saw his worldview utterly shattered and transformed by his experience of combat in the trenches of France. Five years later Universal Studios released a cinematic version of Erich Remarque's famous novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. This production followed a plot quite like *The Big Parade* but instead forced audiences to consider the same humanitarian cost of war from the enemy's perspective. These films carried a narrative that ran quite contrary to the sort of ideas typically highlighted and exalted in previous war films.³⁶ Through productions such as these, Hollywood created characters that possessed a certain degree of innocence that the brutality of war stole away from them. Devoid of glorious or heroic escapades, these films portray war and combat in terms of their human impact. Government attempts to influence film production in Hollywood during the WWI era resulted in the production of many overtly hawkish propaganda

³⁵ Sheldon Hall. *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History*. (Detroit, MI.: Wayne State University Press. 2010), 53.

³⁶ Paul Holsinger. *War and American Popular Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. 198-199.

pieces. In the ensuing post-war years, this tempered public receptivity towards heavily propagandistic messages.³⁷

Leading up to America's entry into the Second World War, two key entities sought to exert influence and control over the Hollywood film industry. The first was the public relations offices of the US military. The War Department's Bureau of Public Relations (BPR) sought for years to make use of Hollywood's capacity to reach vast audiences and shape public opinion. By 1941 the BPR possessed a reciprocal relationship with Hollywood where the military supplied unorthodox filmmaking equipment such as tanks, planes, and combat footage, and in turn Hollywood portrayed military branches in a favorable light.³⁸ The second was The Office of War Information (OWI), a federal entity created June 13, 1942, by executive order 9182. Its stated purpose was to provide the public with information regarding the war effort that the OWI deemed relevant. In Roosevelt's words, the OWI was "formed in recognition of the right of the American people and of all other peoples opposing the Axis aggressors to be truthfully informed about the common war effort."³⁹ Per the order, OWI oversight reached into multiple industries, especially media industries capable of reaching a wide audience. As such, the OWI possessed specific responsibilities regarding the motion picture industry, such as:

³⁷ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*. 1,6.

³⁸ Paul Fussell. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990), 191-192.

³⁹ Franklin D Roosevelt. "Executive Order 9182 Establishing the Office of War Information." June 13, 1942. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16273>.

Article 4-A: "Formulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government."

Article 4-D: "Review, clear, and approve all proposed radio and motion picture programs sponsored by Federal departments and agencies; and serve as the central point of clearance and contact for the radio broadcasting and motion-picture industries, respectively, in their relationships with Federal departments and agencies concerning such Government programs."

This was the full realization of the Supreme Court ruling on *Mutual Film Corp. vs. Ohio* in 1915. While "useful, and entertaining, no doubt," if left unchecked, the film industry was also "capable of evil."⁴⁰ Recognizing Hollywood's tremendous potential to affect and influence public opinion, the Roosevelt administration sought to wield oversight and influence of its own through the OWI.

To supervise this new arm of the government, Roosevelt appointed renowned CBS radio personality Elmer Davis. A long-time reporter and news anchor, Davis understood the potential of mass media as an instrument to shape and mold public opinion. Upon accepting the position, Davis specifically noted the potential of the film industry to disseminate propaganda: "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized."⁴¹ To oversee and deal

⁴⁰ *Mutual Film Corp. vs. Ohio* 236 US. 230, 244 (1915).

⁴¹ Elmer Davis and Byron Price. *War information and censorship*. (Washington, D. C.: American Council on Public Affairs. 1943), 60.

exclusively with the Hollywood film industry Davis created the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), a specific branch of the OWI run by Lowell Mellett and Nelson Poynter. In an effort to inform Hollywood magnates of the OWI's intent regarding its oversight of and collaboration with the movie industry, in 1942 the BMP published the "Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry." Distributed to all major studio heads, directors, writers, and producers in Hollywood, this brief pamphlet sought to articulate and justify the US government's vision for sustaining American commitment to the war:

"The overwhelming majority of the people are behind the government in its war program but they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of this program. In the United States we are not for "blind followers." Unless the public adequately understands the war program, a few military reverses can shatter the high morale of the American people. Unless they adequately understand the magnitude of the program, the people will not willingly make the additional sacrifices that they shall be called upon to make in the prosecution of total war and total victory."

"The government of the United States has an unwavering faith in the sincerity of purpose and integrity of the American people. The American people, on the whole, are not susceptible to the Strategy of Lies. They prefer truth as the vehicle for understanding. The government believes that truth in the end is the only medium to bring about the proper understanding of democracy, the one important ingredient that can help make democracy work. Axis propagandists have failed. They have not told the truth, and their people are now beginning to see through this

sham. If we are to keep faith with the American people, we must not resort to any devious information tactics. We must meet lies with a frontal attack – with the weapon of truth.”⁴²

The BMP and the OWI by extension placed a great deal of emphasis on revealing “the truth” to the American people. It was the function of these government organizations to help shape exactly what truth the public needed to hear. With the Supreme Court precedent for third-party censorship and oversight of the film industry in place for decades, this was not a difficult step to take. Although the OWI maintained that its job consisted of advising not censoring Hollywood films, its power and influence steadily grew from 1942 to 1945. Films released without OWI approval ran the risk of an “un-patriotic” branding which hindered domestic profitability. Additionally, The Office of Censorship, which controlled export licensing for overseas distribution and film sales, frequently deferred to the OWI in granting and approving licensure. Any restriction of foreign profitability proved equally threatening to potential Hollywood productions.⁴³ With economic levers such as these, the OWI obtained a certain level of cooperation from movie-makers in crafting film narratives that the US government deemed consistent with its views and policies.

The unprecedented popularity of movies at the time made the notable level of influence that the government wielded over the film industry especially significant. Few

⁴² *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*. Record Group 208, Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures. “Hollywood Information Manual.” Series 285, General File of the Chief of Newsreel Liaison. 1942. Accessed at: <https://libraries.indiana.edu/collection-digital-archive-gimmpi>

⁴³ Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn H. Parsons. *The Home-front War: World War II and American Society*. (Westport CT.: Greenwood Publishing Group. 1995), 26, 27.

media industries during WWII enjoyed the level of success and influence enjoyed by the Hollywood film industry. Though somewhat limited in terms of profitability, the American film industry by 1940 commanded a sizeable and growing audience. In 1907 the *Saturday Evening Post* reported that daily attendance nationwide at the popular and affordable nickel-theaters (or nickelodeons) exceeded two million.⁴⁴ As the number of theaters across the nation grew so grew demand for film productions. By the middle to late 1920s movie attendance was at an all-time high. Estimates from the US Census Bureau and the Department of Labor and Statistics place US weekly theater attendance in the late 1920s somewhere near ninety million per week.⁴⁵ The census of 1930 estimated the total US population at nearly one hundred and twenty-three million, meaning that on average, over seventy percent of Americans attended films in theaters on a weekly basis.⁴⁶ The stock-market crash in 1929 and the ensuing Depression precipitated a reversal of this trend and theater attendance dropped significantly through the early 1930s. However, by the end of the decade theater attendance soared once again. By 1940 weekly theater attendance in the US represented approximately sixty percent of the American population, nearly recovered from its peak in the 1920s.⁴⁷

Through the WWII years, estimates from the Census Bureau and the Department of

⁴⁴ "The Nickelodeons, the Poor Man's Elementary Course in the Drama." *Saturday Evening Post*. Volume LXXIV, Issue 126. November 23, 1907. 10-11. Reprinted in *Spellbound in Darkness; a History of the Silent Film*. Ed. George C. Pratt. (Greenwich Connecticut, 1973), 43.

⁴⁵ Joel W. Finler. *The Hollywood Story*. (New York: Wallflower. 2003), 378. Also see Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne. *Blue Ocean Strategy, Expanded Edition: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*. (Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press. 2015), 241-242.

⁴⁶ "Historical Census Data" *University of Virginia Library* Accessed at: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/state.php>

⁴⁷ Michelle Pautz. "The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance." *Issues in Political Economy*. Elon University 2002, Vol. 11. Pg. 17.

Labor and Statistics show the weekly number of movie-going patrons steadily climbing from eighty million in 1940 to ninety million by 1946. Again, these figures represented a significant proportion of the American population, especially considering the economic and personnel challenges of staffing and mobilizing the US military.⁴⁸ With so many people regularly attending movies during this era, Hollywood possessed real potential to affect culture and influence public opinion.

WWII-Era Film: Documentaries

Before examining the full-length Hollywood features of this era, it is worth noting the influence of the emergent genre of documentary film and the role it played in shaping public perceptions. Among the more famous examples of these was a series of films directed by the Hollywood icon, Frank Capra. In 1941 Capra demonstrated his appreciation for his adopted homeland in a new and unexpected way, in mid-December he volunteered for US military service. Only days after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the forty-four-year-old Capra enlisted at a local recruiting station and was soon directed to report to the Signal Corps APS (Army Pictorial Service) in Washington DC.⁴⁹ Prior to his enlistment, US Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall invested a good deal of time and attention scouting potentially useful talent in the months leading up to Pearl Harbor.

⁴⁸ Census Bureau figures from Christopher R. Sterling and Timothy R. Haight. *The Mass Media: Aspen Institute Guide to Communication Industry Trends*. (New York: Praeger. 1978), 352. Department of Commerce and Bureau of Labor and Statistics figures from Ian Jarvie. *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-1950*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992), 216.

⁴⁹ Frank Capra. *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography By Frank Capra*. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press. 1997), 315.

Marshall specifically requested Capra's recruitment and assignment to the Signal Corps. Yet it was not until his initial meetings with Marshall and his staff that Capra understood the extent of his new responsibilities.⁵⁰ In their first meeting Marshall informed Capra that he wanted "to nail down a plan to make a series of documented, factual-information films, the first in our history, that will explain to our boys in the Army why we are fighting, and the principles for which we are fighting."⁵¹ Marshall sought to make good use of the Hollywood talent he had in his possession. Capra's enlistment gave the US government and military a very useful tool. Without having to work through or rely on entities like the OWI, Marshall could produce Hollywood caliber films in-house.

The result of this in-house production was the series *Why We Fight*. Used initially to indoctrinate soldiers before entering the battlefield, the government later released these documentaries in theaters nationwide. *Prelude to War* is the first film of the series and one of the most famous. As the title suggests, the film outlines and explains reasons why America must involve itself in WWII. Devoid of any speaking parts or character development, the only thing that strings together the long sequence of video footage from battlefronts around the world is the drone of the narrator's voice. In this sense, *Prelude to War* stands out as a very overt piece of government sanctioned propaganda. Its narrative and underlying ideology come neatly packaged. Devoid of the nuance and complexity of a traditional Hollywood blockbuster and lacking in box-office success, it is tempting to write-off these Capra films or at least treat them as categorically different.

⁵⁰ Joseph McBride. *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*. (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi. 2011), 448-449.

⁵¹ Frank Capra. *The Name Above the Title*. 326.

Yet the timing of the film's release along with the content of its narrative make it a particularly interesting study.

Several documentary filmmakers took up recording the European conflict well before the US directly involved itself in WWII. In 1940 RKO Pictures released *The Ramparts We Watch*, a non-fiction documentary directed by Louis De Rochemont that attempted to garner support for US involvement in WWII. This film sought to explain the need for America to intervene in WWII by highlighting the successes of US involvement in WWI. It presented a world that was "safe for democracy" thanks to the heroic sacrifices made by American soldiers a generation before, but that was again threatened by the rise of fascism and tyranny.⁵² Shortly thereafter Paramount released *World In Flames* in 1941, a documentary that sought to outline and explain the eruption of conflict in Asia and Europe. And just months before the release of Capra's film, the OWI under the direction of Lowell Mellett released *A World at War*, yet another documentary piece explaining the outbreak and causes of WWII.⁵³ Therefore, while *Prelude to War* unremarkably followed in a long line of documentary pieces regarding the causal factors of WWII, in very clear terms it echoed many of the narratives and perspectives that had already emerged in mainstream Hollywood. The film depicts the struggle of the "free" world vs. the "slave" world. It claims that the ideas of the founding fathers and the Constitution provide the foundation of freedom and liberty for all people, and it holds freedom as the highest of human ideals and objectives. Capra

⁵² Robert Barsam. M. *Nonfiction film: A critical history*. (New York: Dutton. 1973), 181.

⁵³ Clayton Koppes and Gregory D Black. *Hollywood Goes to War: Patriotism, Movies and the Second World War from Ninotchka to Mrs. Miniver*. 52.

portrays these values of individual freedom and liberty as those that demand the highest of human sacrifice, values that a people should not hesitate in waging war to defend.⁵⁴ In this way Capra drew upon distinctions that audiences already understood and portrayed them in the most severe terms.

Capra further developed his film series throughout the conflict, and the works of many other renowned directors joined his as the years went by. Notable examples include John Huston's *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), John Ford's *The Battle of Midway* (1942), and William Wyler's *The Fighting Lady* (1944) and *Thunderbolt* (1947). Documentary-style films such as these and the many others produced during the war possessed the distinct advantage of realism as they captured action without the aid of sets and actors. As such, these films wielded tremendous potential to influence narratives about America, America's allies, and its enemies. They also informed and heavily influenced the conceptual design and style of the many other fictionalized Hollywood features that depicted WWII.

The remarkable effort of WWII combat photographers and cinematographers provided American filmmakers and audiences with a wealth of rare and important documentation of front line action around the world. In fact, the National Archives estimates the total uncut length of WWII combat film to be over 13.5 million feet.⁵⁵ Yet, while documentary productions offer insight into the messages and narratives that

⁵⁴ *Prelude to War*, Directed and Produced by Frank Capra. Released by the War Activities Committee, May 27, 1942.

⁵⁵ Jeannine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. 113.

resonated with filmmakers and even government agencies regarding the war and its actors, they make less-effective gauges of public perception. Though useful for analyzing the stylistic and ideological continuities between them and mainstream productions, documentaries simply did not have the same public appeal that attracted large audiences. In order to unpack the ideology consumed by large swaths of American society during this era one must examine the mostly fictionalized feature-length blockbusters. With the surging popularity of the American cinema during the 1940s, the more renowned films of the era possessed incredible potential to impact and influence a vast percentage of the American population.

WWII-Era Film: Russia

One of Hollywood's great strengths is its ability, for better or worse, to acquaint Americans with unfamiliar peoples. Through the decades that preceded WWII many people groups fell into this category, but one group in-particular became increasingly important for American audiences to understand: communists. The 1920s and 1930s were formative decades for communism. The revolution in Russia brought this formerly academic concept to the forefront of diplomatic and foreign policy discussion around the world during this era. Anti-communist propaganda emerged in America shortly after the October Revolution of 1917 and continued throughout the subsequent decades. Hollywood added its voice to the discussion early, releasing its first openly anti-communist feature *Bullin' the Bullsheviki* in 1919. By 1941 communists possessed a long

history as antagonists and cinematic villains. Through the 1920's and 30's, Hollywood produced no less than 20 full-length features that openly criticized communism or Soviet Russia.⁵⁶ Some films took a documentary-style approach to analyzing the horrors facing those in living through the Bolshevik era and criticizing communist despotism such as 20th Century Fox's 1923 release, *Red Russia Revealed*. Other films like United Artists' 1935 romantic comedy *Red Salute* took a lighter touch, poking fun at Russians and communist ideology. Still others such as *Tovarich* (Warner Bros. 1937) took a more nuanced approach to depicting the civil tension between the Reds and the Whites and how it impacted Russians at every level of society. In almost every instance films of this era that dealt with Russia often incorporated depictions of Soviet society as deplorable and communism as a bankrupt political system. Two MGM productions in the late 1930s, *Comrade X* directed by King Vidor and *Ninotchka* directed by Ernst Lubitsch, provide particularly popular and interesting examples of this.

Released in 1939, *Ninotchka* delivers an unveiled critique of both the Soviet people and as well as their political structures. The film opens with Soviet Trade officers visiting Paris and soon becoming enamored with the wealth and opulence that they find there. Upon returning to their lives of poverty in Russia, they conspire to leave once and for all on the next diplomatic mission to Constantinople. Through these characters audiences right away witness the supposed hypocritical nature of Russian communists. However, in contrast to these materialistic communist officials, Hollywood star Greta

⁵⁶ "The Red Scare: A Filmography." Compiled by: Glenda Pearson. *University of Washington Libraries*. 1998. Accessed at: <https://www.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/AllPowers/film.html>

Garbo shows audiences the face of a true believer in her skillful portrayal of the Soviet commissar Ninotchka. Through this central character, the film delivers its underlying narrative of moral superiority. A dedicated watchdog, Ninotchka also travels to Paris early in the film to follow up on the sale of the jewels. During her time there, audiences witness Ninotchka's emotionless, mechanical interactions with her foreign surroundings. Rather than the highly racialized representation employed by Hollywood for other Eastern cultures, the Soviet commissar comes across as un-human. From her mirthless dismissal of the Parisian Count who tries to flirt with her to her robotic mannerisms and physical traits, Garbo's character perpetuates a narrative of Russian communists as immune to the qualities and values of high culture.

Ninotchka also contrasts the political superiority of the enlightened West against the single-minded barbarism of the East. Though written as a romantic-comedy, the film inserts the odd political reference as well. Most insertions refer to Soviet political or economic policies in a simplistic, sarcastic manner that makes them seem ludicrous or illogical. The Trade officers mock Stalin's 5 Year Plan, and Ninotchka remarks of Stalin's purges; "the last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians." In the end, audiences witness the bankruptcy of Soviet political ideology as even the great idealist Ninotchka succumbs to the allure of Western society. Paris serves as the representative conduit of republican values such as liberty or laissez-faire capitalism, and the Parisian Count Leon d'Algout through charm and seduction incites Ninotchka's conversion. Once this conversion is complete, audiences encounter a tender

and re-animated woman embracing her passions and emotions and finally fulfilling her heroine role.

The metamorphosis of the title character in *Ninotchka* underscores the inherent superiority of Western society, culture, and values. Produced in 1939 and released the following year, MGM's *Comrade X* also delivers a stark contrast between Western democracies and communism. Starring Hollywood icons Clark Gable and Hedy Lamarr, the film gave audiences a humorous, unilateral peek into a wildly corrupt Soviet political system. Also meant to be a romantic comedy, *Comrade X* has a well-balanced blend of witty dialogue, suspense, action, and romance. As such it remained popular with moviegoers for several years.⁵⁷ Gable plays McKinley Thompson, an American living in Moscow under the auspices of writing for an American journal. However, concealed within his correspondence under the pseudonym "Comrade X" Thompson encodes secret messages that expose Soviet political activity in Moscow. He faces a dilemma when the valet at his hotel discovers his secret double life and threatens to expose Thompson unless he will promise to help the valet's daughter, the lovely Theodore (Lamarr), escape to America. A *Ninotchka*-like character, Theodore is an idealist and does not easily acquiesce to her father's arrangement. Yet through Thompson's charm and her eventual disillusionment with commissars of Moscow, Theodore finally assents to masquerade as Thompson's wife and make her escape. As the plot reaches its climax,

⁵⁷ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*. 25.

the unlikely couple narrowly escape arrest, steal a Soviet tank, and rumble their way across the border to freedom with the entire Soviet army in pursuit.

Though written with the aim of invoking laughter, *Comrade X* nevertheless leveled very real criticisms at Soviet Russia and furthered existing perspectives of America and its enemies. The film lambasted the Soviet government and portrayed its politicians and officials as a gang of cruel, witless thugs. By contrast, Gable's character, Mac Thompson, reinforced the American archetype. Thompson is self-reliant and clever, not as rough around the edges as Bogart's Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, but still sacrificially altruistic and someone that other characters look to for help. Through Thompson's secret work, audiences peer into a hopelessly fragmented political system in Moscow that makes every office holder into a two-faced yes-man that does anything necessary to preserve their own survival. Consequently, this upheaval paralyzes the city. Yet Moscow's residents seem acclimated to this and blindly accept their reality, as seen when Thompson hears from the hotel valet: "last week all the towels were stolen. But on the other hand, the water wasn't running so nobody needed the towels. Everything balances." This conditioned blindness to the Soviet political system emerges most clearly through Hedy Lamarr's character. The beautiful girl goes by the name Theodore, disguising and neglecting her femininity in order to hold down her job as a trolley driver, a post supposedly forbidden to women in Moscow. Though Thompson appears incredulous upon learning this, Theodore happily bears her cross of oppression without complaint. Despite the indignity she faces, Theodore maintains her loyalty to the party and appears to audiences as naïve and simple-minded. Yet as the plot progresses a

gradual evolution takes place. Her interactions with Thompson have a therapeutic effect; through exposure to the charm and intelligence of this brave American she finally sees the hypocrisy surrounding her and acquiesces to flee her homeland. By the film's conclusion audiences observe the once ardent communist by Thompson's side in Brooklyn cheering for the home team at a baseball game.

Unsurprisingly, *Ninotchka* and *Comrade X* never played in Russian theaters. Yet both films performed quite well in domestic box offices as well as abroad. Each earned over 2 million dollars, making them among the highest grossing films of 1940.⁵⁸ The representation of Soviet characters in these films remained consistent with what American audiences had seen for over a decade.⁵⁹ The prevailing narratives in both features regarding the inferiority and depravity of Soviet Russia did not stand in isolation. Film historians Shull and Wilt identify at least nine Hollywood features released between 1937 and 1941 that qualify as distinctly anti-Soviet.⁶⁰ Next to their American and Western European counterparts, the Russians that appear in the films of this era appear inferior. Though they appear capable of redemption, as evidenced in the conversion of *Ninotchka* and Theodore, this only occurred through the aid of more civilized, altruistic Westerners and exposure to the freedom and luxury offered under Western democracies.

⁵⁸ Tony Shaw. *Hollywood's Cold War*. (Amherst MA.: University of Massachusetts Press. 2007), 23. Also: John Gladchuk. *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of the Red Menace, 1935-1950*. (New York: Routledge Press. 2013), 131.

⁵⁹ Ruth Vasey. *The World According to Hollywood*. (Madison WI.: University of Wisconsin Press. 1997), 242.

⁶⁰ Michael Shull and David Wilt. *Hollywood War Films*. (Jefferson NC.: McFarland Press. 2006), 249.

This long-standing portrayal of Russian inferiority was so palpable that it suddenly became an issue in the summer of 1941. Upon the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Russians instantly became the largest of the Allied nations and the only serious contender facing Hitler in Europe. Though the US remained officially neutral, American filmmakers nevertheless faced the challenge of reversing or at least softening a widely accepted anti-Russian narrative built over many years. Yet films such as *Ninotchka* and *Comrade X* resonated with the American public and regularly drew large audiences, so much so that the screening of the movies could not stop. From 1941-1945 the films continued to play in theaters across the nation, with the simple modification of a brief message inserted into the opening credits that explained what followed as a sporting joke, a form of harmless banter between allied nations.⁶¹ Yet the narrative remained clear and unchanged despite any attempt to disguise it. No matter how interdependent the US and the Soviet Union became, Americans saw themselves as superior by comparison.

WWII-Era Film: Germany

By the early 1940s Russia was not the only source of Hollywood villains; Germany also offered a fertile source for unsavory movie characters. Like Russia, the roots of American distrust and animosity towards Germany extended back to the First World War. Widely perceived as a belligerent power in Europe for many years and the

⁶¹ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood propaganda of World War II*. 26-27.

chief aggressor during WWI, Germany provided an excellent lightning-rod for the malice of American moviegoers. Films such as *To Hell with the Kaiser!*, *The Hun Within*, and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* established overwhelmingly negative and one-dimensional narratives regarding German characters. Such films branded Germans as bestial and ravenously imperialistic, associating them with Satan and their military aims with apocalyptic destruction. Yet, these narratives evolved over the years in unique ways that set Hollywood portrayals of Germans apart from the rest of America's wartime adversaries.

There are two key reasons why Hollywood adapted its portrayal of Germans leading up to WWII. The first relates to economic factors. The Hollywood film industry grew exponentially through the 1920s and 1930s, and much of this growth relied on distribution in foreign markets. The trade journal *Variety* reported Department of Commerce data in 1934 that analyzed the revenue potential for Hollywood films in 52 countries outside the United States. According to their list created from the data, Germany represented the third most profitable foreign market in the world at the time.⁶²

⁶² John Sedgwick and Mike Pokorny. "Hollywood's foreign earnings during the 1930s." *Transnational Cinemas* Volume 1: Issue 1, pp. 88, 94. Accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239595348_Hollywood's_foreign_earnings_during_the_1930s

Country	Population (1)	No. of Theaters (3)	Gross Revenue Possibilities (\$US) (4)	Proportion of Total gross Revenue Possibilities (5)	No of theaters per 1,000 inhabitants (6)	Gross Revenue Possibilities per million inhabitants (\$US) (7)	Gross Revenue Possibilities per theater (\$US) (8)
United Kingdom	46,159,445	4,950	675,000	0.30	107	14.62	136
France	41,834,923	3,900	350,000	0.16	93	8.37	90
Germany	64,600,000	4,000	300,000	0.13	62	4.64	75

This meant that Hollywood production studios could ill afford to continually villainize Germans without notable financial repercussions. By contrast, Russia's share of Hollywood's overseas market gradually declined through the 1920s. Ultimately by 1931, as a part of Stalin's restructuring of Russia's traditional social and economic systems, the Soviet Union altogether banned any import of Hollywood films.⁶³ Thus, the Dept. of Commerce completely ignored the Soviet market in its analysis of global earning potential and Hollywood filmmakers followed suit. Throughout the entire decade preceding WWII German reception of American films demanded some level of consideration, while Soviet reception was a non-factor.

The second reason relates to political and diplomatic forces. The Versailles Treaty following the end of WWI demanded a complete restructuring of German government and political systems. Despite the multitude of complications with the resulting Weimar Republic, it represented a step towards alignment with other Western democracies. As such, the US government officially supported and maintained relations with this government and dissuaded Hollywood from taking any steps to jeopardize this

⁶³ John Sedgwick and Mike Pokorny. "Hollywood's foreign earnings during the 1930s." 92.

relationship.⁶⁴ Despite the rise of German fascism in the early 1930s and its involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Hollywood's governing body, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), maintained the need for neutrality: "The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of all nations shall be represented fairly."⁶⁵ The only caveat to this code of ethics was that it only really applied to nations that imported Hollywood films. *The Hollywood Reporter* noted this discrepancy in its November 1935 issue: "it is admitted today, due to the political situation throughout Europe, censorship on pictures touching on topics considered dangerous to those in power is tougher than ever. The picture companies are through with their former stand, 'We'll make it anyway.' They now listen to foreign departments whose business it is to keep in touch with problems confronting the sales department abroad."⁶⁶ Political relationships stood to suffer or benefit from Hollywood portrayals of foreign governments and societies. Likewise, American films bowed to political and diplomatic pressures as well as economic ones. Washington possessed strained political relations with the Soviet Union nearly from its inception, and once Stalin banned Hollywood films it became both politically and economically prudent for filmmakers to employ Russian

⁶⁴ Bernard Burke. *Ambassador Frederic Sackett and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic, 1930-1933*. (Cambridge UK.: Cambridge University Press. 2003), 3-4. See also: *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*. Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures. "Fact Sheet 5: 'They' Got the Blame." (Washington, D.C.: Office of War Information. 1942.) Accessed at the Digital Archives for Indiana University: <https://libraries.indiana.edu/collection-digital-archive-gimmpi>

⁶⁵ Quoted in McLaughlin and Parry. *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*. Pg. 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

antagonists. By contrast, for the same political and diplomatic reasons, cinematic portrayals of Germans required more restraint and tact.

Nevertheless, 1930s Hollywood filmmakers found ways around such limitations. They achieved this through making films set during past eras which (supposedly) removed them from contemporary socio-political commentary. Films like *Hells Angels* (1930) harkened to the 'evil' Germany of WWI. This film promoted the stereotype of Germans as stiff, intelligent, and proficient orchestrators of mass-cruelty. Other films constructed sinister narratives regarding Germany through making vague references that officially criticized no one. For example, *Nation Aflame* (1937) featured a plot that revolved around the growth of a hyper-nationalistic organization, "Avenging Angles." Set in America, the storyline clearly draws upon the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany without making direct references. It presents a terrifying 'what if' scenario surrounding the un-checked growth of extreme right-wing ideology meant to foster concern among American audiences.⁶⁷ Hollywood developed many negative narrative elements regarding Germany in the decade preceding WWII while attempting to practice restraint and stay within diplomatic boundaries. Yet this restraint vanished in 1939, and in the years that followed American moviegoers witnessed the gloves coming off as filmmakers established and adapted narratives regarding German depravity and inferiority.

⁶⁷ *Hell's Angles*. Directed by Howard Hughes. Distributed by United Artists, 1930. Also: *Nation Aflame*. Directed by Victor Halperin. Distributed by Victor & Edward Halperin Productions, 1937.

The studio that broke the mold of acceptable criticism towards Germany was Warner Bros. with their 1939 production *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Released in April, several months ahead of Germany's invasion of Poland, this film was the first to openly disparage and villainize the Nazis. As such, it generated a significant amount of controversy. In its initial development producers deemed the film a bit risky for public release, but the Warner brothers, Jack and Harry, possessed very strong convictions about taking Nazi Germany to task. These feelings rose primarily from the inauspicious murder of Warner Bros. German Office liaison Joe Kaufman only a few months before the film's scheduled release.⁶⁸ This unfortunate crime not only prompted Warner Bros. to recall everyone in their organization stationed in Germany, but also to move forward with completion and release of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.

The film derives its plot from actual FBI records of a German spy ring operating in the Eastern US through the mid to late 1930s. The German-American Bund provided the organizational structure for this spy network, both in the film as well as in reality. Edward Robinson stars in the film as FBI agent Edward Renard who uses his skills as an interrogator to build a case against key Bund members; Kurt Schneider (played by Francis Lederer), Franz Schlager (George Sanders), Hilda Kleinbauer (Dorothy Tree) and Dr. Karl Kassel (Paul Lukas). The film has the look and feel of a documentary piece, an important component as the Warners wished to highlight the reality of the Nazi threat.⁶⁹ The film further reinforces this sense of realism through the use of narrator

⁶⁸ Cass Warner Sperlign, Cork Millner and Jack Warner. *Hollywood Be Thy Name: The Warner Brothers Story*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1998), 233.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 235.

John Deering, whose firm, earnest voice warns audiences that “the Nazi Party has created a new fascist society based on a devout worship of the Aryan superman, a new fascist culture infused with the glorification of conquest and war, a fascist system of life where every man, woman and child must think alike, speak alike, and do alike... a new religion ridiculing the brotherhood and equality of men before God.” These ominous words set the stage for the drama that unfolds. The film follows the actions of key Bund members who spy and report on US military preparedness and armament, and who eventually expose their operations to agent Renard. It then focuses of the FBI’s interrogation, arrest, and building of a case for each key member that they can apprehend. The film culminates with the trial and sentencing of four Nazi spies, mirroring a trial that the FBI conducted in October 1938. The ideology and depth of commitment agent Renard finds in the many Americans and German-Americans participating in the spy organization shocks him. It is through this distinction between American and German ideology that *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* shines as a vehicle for propaganda.

This film goes to great lengths to debase Nazi policy and ideology and promotes American ideals as the antithesis to the German brand of fascism. It does this through a rather heavy-handed portrayal of the American-German Bund and its members. The New York City meeting hall of the Bund has the look and pomp of a Berlin rally for the Fuhrer himself. Swastikas adorn the walls, banners, and uniforms of all present who salute speakers with “Sieg Heil!” In a speech delivered to his fellow Bund members, Dr. Karl Kassel observes that America is “a basically uncultured country” and for it to truly

attain freedom “we must destroy the chains that tie the whole misery of American politics together, and that chain is the U.S. Constitution. We need to make war against the Bill of Rights.” Such statements provide a simplistic narrative for understanding fascism and place German political ideology in binary opposition to America’s. In a later scene, Dr. Kassel adds more color and detail to the Nazi vision for the future: “Those who fight us must perish socially as well as economically because of our determination to destroy our enemies completely and without any consideration...Germans must save America from the chaos that breeds in democracy and racial equality. We Germans must make the United States our America!” Statements such as this emphasize the vastly different social and moral ideologies that Germans possess. Through direct input from the narrator as well as indirect cues like characters’ tone, manner, and context, the film exhibits the maniacal and diabolical nature of Nazi ideals. The film very carefully and deliberately contrasts these with American values and ideals, and though it does not devote much space for glorifying those ideals, it leaves a clear impression of their superiority over German ideology.

The release of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* set off a flurry of responses. Some protested and even rioted outside of theaters that ran the feature, while others supported it as a long-overdue response to contemporary political events. Congress summoned the Warners themselves to appear before an inquest in Washington to explain how this film was not “war-mongering propaganda.”⁷⁰ Yet the film quickly

⁷⁰ Cass Warner Sperlign, Cork Millner and Jack Warner. *Hollywood Be Thy Name*. 237-38.

gained company from other production studios. Soon after his invasion of Poland, Hitler followed Stalin's example and banned the sale or distribution of American-made films in Germany.⁷¹ The official loss of this market combined with continued German aggression in Europe opened the floodgates to produce anti-German films. By late 1941 when the US officially entered WWII, Hollywood already possessed a repertoire of works that enlightened American audiences about their German foes.

Many films produced in the brief window between 1939 and 1941 relied on placing this new European war into the context of WWI. Films such as *Espionage Agent* (1939), *British Intelligence* (1940), *Sargent York* (1940) or *The Fighting 69th* (1941) all re-framed old narratives for American involvement in WWI and its ultimate positive outcomes. Yet many other productions established clear positions on the contemporary conflict in Europe and constructed familiar narratives of German villainy. Films such as United Artists' *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and 20th Century Fox's *Man Hunt* (1941) both utilized German characters as sinister antagonists in plots featuring both American and British heroes. Unlike Hollywood portrayals of villainous Russians, in these films the Germans are not dull-witted goons or mindless stooges that parrot party politics. Rather they appear cunning, cold, and efficient. In contrast to the protagonists in these films, the Germans are ubiquitous in number and possess a certain unpredictability that makes them all the more dangerous. The one notable exception to this prevailing German narrative is Charlie Chaplin's famous comedy *The Great Dictator* (1940). Chaplin

⁷¹ John Sedgwick and Mike Pokorny. "Hollywood's foreign earnings during the 1930s." 83, 97.

delivers a masterclass of physical comedy in this film with his portrayal of the Hitler-equivalent Adenoid Hynkel. He also deals specifically with the German persecution of Jews, a matter addressed in few other contemporary films. Yet he leaves audiences with a diluted impression of the German Fuhrer. He certainly portrays Hitler as dangerous, but in the way that a toddler wielding a loaded gun is dangerous. In this way, the film downplays some of the more sinister elements of Nazi rule, a characteristic that Chaplin himself later regretted.⁷² However, Chaplin's film is something of an anomaly. Many contemporary as well as subsequent productions held up Germany as a serious existential threat. Yet some also showed the complexity of the German enemy and defied over-simplistic stereotypes. The care taken to distinguish citizens of an enemy nation between the 'good' and 'bad' ones was a practice uniquely applied to Germans. Other nations and people groups did not receive such treatment from Hollywood. Yet despite more nuanced portrayals, America and its allies maintained the role of the hero. They were the antidote to Nazi ideology and a people who held to higher moral standards.

In 1940, 20th Century Fox released *The Man I Married*, a prime example of a film that delivered more nuanced anti-German narratives than other comparable productions. Set in the late 1930s, the plot revolves around Joan Bennett's character Carol Hoffman, a single mother who moves to New York and falls in love with German national Eric Hoffman, played by Francis Lederer. The two soon marry and on their

⁷²Charlie Chaplin. *My Autobiography*. (New York: Penguin Books. 2003), 154-56.

honeymoon they travel to Eric's hometown Berlin with their son Ricky in order to settle matters with the family business. Before leaving New York, Carol receives money from a German friend who wishes to extradite her university professor uncle from the concentration camp at Dachau where the Nazis hold him as an enemy of the state. This plants the first seed of suspicion in Carol's mind regarding what she will encounter in Eric's homeland. Uninformed of many recent European affairs, Carol finds herself bewildered at Germany's social and political condition as she travels the capital. While travelling she encounters a fellow American, journalist Kenneth Delane (played by Lloyd Nolan), who helps her track down the prisoner and explain some of what is going on in the city around her. Through her investigation, she learns that the prisoner she sought was unofficially executed and the truth covered up. She witnesses Jews and foreigners undergo persecution and forced labor, she listens to Hitler's speeches at rallies, and the Gestapo ultimately arrest and question her after she attempts to hide Jews looking to escape. Through everything she sees and hears in her time there, Carol becomes increasingly horrified at the state of Germany under Hitler's regime.

However, Carol's husband Eric has an entirely different reaction. Hitler's political rhetoric and the fanfare surrounding the Nazi party capture Eric's imagination. Through this fascination and a renewed connection with an old flame who is an ardent Nazi, Eric experiences a gradual indoctrination in the ideology of National Socialism. Eventually audiences witness a complete transformation as Eric determines to join the Nazi party and not return to America. Because of Carol's vocal denouncement of Hitler and Nazism, Eric demands a divorce and conspires to keep custody of Carol's son so that he can be

raised German. All this tension boils over in a climactic scene where Eric's father demands that he allow Carol to leave in peace with her son, threatening otherwise to reveal to the authorities that Eric's mother was Jewish. With Eric stunned by this revelation, Carol makes her escape to New York with her son and Delane.⁷³

The Man I Married delivered a rather nuanced portrayal of German society in the early years of WWII as it showed a society at war with itself. Throughout the film audiences witnessed familiar representations of Germans as cruel, cold, and monochromatic brutes who display unflinching loyalty to the state. The film depicts enthusiastic crowds of civilians cheering at Nazi rallies, robotic storm-troopers conducting domestic raids and arresting Jews, and soldiers working with complicit civilians to persecute people that the state deemed undesirable. Yet in contrast, audiences also saw Germans like Eric's father who remained skeptical of Nazi ideology and suspected that his country was on a ruinous path to destruction. Or the family of the imprisoned German professor who fruitlessly sought answers from a government that actively worked to silence them. Or German Jews like the ones Carol attempted to smuggle out of the city to escape imprisonment. Eric especially personifies this sense of German civil unrest. Through the film audiences witnessed his blossoming enthusiasm for his homeland under Nazi leadership; an enthusiasm that inoculated him to the apparent hypocrisy and injustice of that leadership. In Eric, the film packages a narrative of the good German gone bad. He is not the sub-human, villainous brute that Americans

⁷³ *The Man I Married*. Directed by Irving Pichel. Distributed by 20th Century Fox Entertainment, 1940.

saw (and would see) in other films from the era. Yet in the end, Eric and the many other Germans in the film proved beyond redemption. They lacked the ability and willpower to either resist or flee the expanding Nazi state. Only the American characters possessed the wherewithal to recognize the folly and cruelty of Nazism and escape ahead of its ominous advance. While the film drew the distinction that not all Germans are Nazis, it implied the complicity of all Germans in their fascist regime either through their action or inaction.

After 1941 once the US officially entered WWII on the side of the Allies, the number of films that openly attacked Nazi Germany rose dramatically.⁷⁴ One of the earliest and most successful films that emerged riding this wave of increase was MGM's *Mrs. Miniver*. Released a few months into 1942, the production quickly won popular and critical acclaim winning Academy Awards for Best Actress, Best Director, Best Writing, and Best Editing.⁷⁵ Set in a fictional village outside of London, the plot revolves around the lives and struggles of the Miniver family as they experience the long reach of the European war. Greer Garson delivers an award-winning performance as Kay Miniver, an upper middle-class British housewife and mother. It is through this rather unique and unassuming perspective that audiences behold the horrors of war. Even though the film possesses no American characters of any significance, it nevertheless contains important ideological assertions, customized for American audiences.

⁷⁴Jack Alicoate. *The 1943 Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures*. (New York: The Film Daily Publishers. 1943), 41-47.

⁷⁵ "The 15th Academy Awards, 1943." *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Online Archive accessed at: <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1943>

As the film's production evenly spans the time immediately before and after US entry into the war, the writing and directing of *Mrs. Miniver* provides a unique example of how Hollywood tailored cinematic narrative. Prior to December 1941, scripts and screenplays contained many elements that highlighted the complacency of pre-war British society. For example, one scene from an earlier iteration featured a German spy observing the Minivers and their materialistic preoccupations: "despite their appearance of prosperity, the cars they are so proud to own and the fashionable cloths they contrive to afford, these people are morally and spiritually bankrupt. Once the bulwark of England's greatness, they are now its weakest element because of their craving for pleasure – their lack of wholesome discipline. Supine, comfort-loving, materialistic, this class in its decadence foreshadows the death of a once mighty nation – it will offer no resistance to the world domination of a Master Race."⁷⁶ Yet this monologue, as well as numerous other scenes that depicted the naïve ambivalence of the Minivers in early parts of the film, gave way to the wholesome and conscientious characters that audiences encounter in the final production. Director William Wyler specifically intended for this transition in character development to serve ideological purposes. After December 7th, he along with the film's producers decided that the Minivers would make a better tool for propaganda if they came across looking less culpable or "at fault" for ignoring and appeasing the Nazi threat. American audiences

⁷⁶ Mark Glancy. *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood "British" Film 1939-45*. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press. 1999), 145-46

would more readily empathize with and rush to support a British people who appeared more innocent.⁷⁷

Perhaps more than any other contemporary production, *Mrs. Miniver* Americanized a foreign people; it took many typically American qualities and superimposed them onto British characters. One way the film accomplished this was through its construction of British society and emphasis on the middle-class as the backbone of that structure. It showcases a society in which class differences manifest themselves but do not boil over into class-conflict thanks to the bounty of laissez-faire capitalism and steadfast influence of the middle-class. The film establishes such differences early on as audiences witness Kay Miniver's interaction with Lady Beldon. Beldon is a stereotypical aristocrat who possesses an apparent contempt for egalitarianism and the growth of the middle class that 20th century capitalism brought to Great Britain. She speaks to Kay Miniver with condescension in her voice about the nouveau riche who parade about "trying to be better than their betters: mink coats and no manners!" Meanwhile, audiences see in the Minivers a portrait of middle-class generosity. Kay walks comfortably on both sides of the socio-economic fence as she moves from politely engaging with Lady Beldon to talking with the humble, working-class station attendant Mr. Ballard who is openly grateful that she takes the time to do so.

⁷⁷ Axel Madsen. *William Wyler*. (New York: Open Road Media. 2015), 214.

Later in the film audiences come to know the Minivers' eldest son Vin, who also exhibits the virtuous qualities of the middle-class. A young and charismatic university student, Vin returns to the Miniver household full of idealistic visions of transforming English society into a communist utopia. Unlike many other films that deal with communist doctrine, Vin's idealism comes across as a genuine and innocent concern for those less fortunate. He declares to his family "I've developed a social consciousness ...the recognition of my fellow man. Where are there free men today, any more than in the 9th through the 15th centuries? Look, the 9th to 15th centuries, when the lords held all the land and parceled out what they wished to their vassals. Look about. What have we? As pure a feudalistic state as there ever was." Yet throughout the film Vin finds that his notions about class antagonism were misplaced. Through conversations with multiple working-class characters such as the household maid, Vin increasingly realizes the flaws in many of his assumptions about their discontentedness. The film's working-class characters express no ill-will towards other members of society or towards the economic system, instead a certain level of respect and consideration exists between those at all levels of the socio-economic spectrum.

The Minivers' small suburban town showcases Western democracy and capitalism at its very best, and at the heart of it all is the character and virtue displayed by its middle-class members. The film propagates this characteristic most vividly through highlighting the community's spiritual, Christian mores as displayed through courageous and sacrificial acts. This especially comes through in the second half of the film after Britain declares war against the Nazis. The mood throughout the Minivers

quaint town shifts quite dramatically and audiences witness very ordinary characters spring into action to aid the war effort. Mr. Miniver volunteers to aid in the evacuation of Dunkirk despite being well beyond the age of expected service. Vin declines to return to university in favor of joining the RAF and defending British skies from the infamous German Blitz. Meanwhile the rest of the village residents do their best to adapt to the changes, hardships, and dangers that the war brings to their daily existence.

Kay Miniver is the focal point for many of the conflict's domestic effects, most notably in a few sequences where she encounters the German enemy face to face. While her husband and son are away participating in the war effort a German fighter plane crashes nearby and to Kay's shock and alarm the pilot appears in her own garden and at gunpoint requests her assistance. Invading the Miniver home with an unsettling, maniacal look in his eyes, in broken English the German gruffly demands food and milk which he scarfs down like a wild animal. Yet despite this rattling experience, Kay maintains her wits and calmly placates her enemy's requests until he faints from his wounds and she is able to confiscate his pistol and call the police. At this point the film vividly characterizes the differences between the middle-class virtues of Western democracy and the depravity of German despotism. Upon the German regaining consciousness, Kay assures the young man that the officials on their way to collect him will provide shelter, food, and medical care for his wounds. Despite her fright and mistreatment, she looks upon this intruder with the Biblical compassion of the Good Samaritan and assures him that he will soon return home as "the war will not last forever." Yet in response to this the German sneers, "Soon we finish it. I'm finished, but

others come like me. Thousands, many thousands. Better. All of this...you will see. We will come. We will bomb your cities, like Barcelona, Warsaw, Narvik, Rotterdam. Rotterdam we destroy in two hours... Thirty thousand in two hours. And we will do the same thing here.” Here the film advertises the callous, cruel character of Britain’s adversary through this single German pilot who appears devoid of ethical compunction. As if to underscore the notion that this kind of enemy will not respond to reason or appeals to morality, Kay Miniver slaps the German across the face upon hearing his response.

The intimation that Britain stands on the right side of this conflict emerges through several moving scenes from within the village church where the vicar addresses his congregation. In the middle of the film after Britain declares war, he admonishes his congregation to keep the prayer for peace in their hearts, “coupled now with the prayer for our beloved country. We in this village have not failed in the past. Our forefathers, for 1 000 years, have fought for the freedom that we now enjoy. And that we must now defend again with God's help.” This theme of fighting a morally just war recurs through the latter half of the film and finds a climactic summation in another admonition from the pulpit in the film’s final scene. Gathered in the bombed wreckage of the sanctuary the vicar addresses the beleaguered congregation as the chorus “Onward Christian Soldiers” gently crescendos in the background:

“The homes of many of us have been destroyed, and the lives of young and old have been taken. There is scarcely a household that hasn't been struck to the heart. And why? Surely you must have asked yourself this question. Why in all conscience should these be the ones to suffer?

Children, old people, a young girl at the height of her loveliness. Why these? Are these our soldiers? Are these our fighters? Why should they be sacrificed? I shall tell you why. Because this is not only a war of soldiers in uniform. It is a war of the people, of all the people, and it must be fought not only on the battlefield, but in the cities and in the villages, in the factories and on the farms, in the home, and in the heart of every man, woman, and child who loves freedom! Well, we have buried our dead, but we shall not forget them. Instead they will inspire us with an unbreakable determination to free ourselves and those who come after us from the tyranny and terror that threaten to strike us down. This is the people's war! It is our war! We are the fighters! Fight it then! Fight it with all that is in us, and may God defend the right."⁷⁸

This stirring homily articulated the lines connecting Anglo and American exceptionalism. The themes of altruism and sacrifice in the face of adversity, the notion of fighting to defend freedom and liberty at any cost, or the idea that God intervenes on behalf of those who fight for such causes, all convene to create a stirring appeal. Such ideological narratives resonated firmly with American audiences and propelled the film to tremendous box-office success. Such was its impact that aside from being the most popular film of 1942, it also received public praise and endorsement from the likes of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt.⁷⁹ In fact, the American president was so enamored with the film's message and its potential as a vehicle for propaganda that he had the vicar's final speech printed onto leaflets and airdropped into Nazi-occupied territories.⁸⁰ All of this points to the emotional and ideological connection that *Mrs. Miniver* allowed American audiences to feel towards their English brethren. The film

⁷⁸ *Mrs. Miniver*. Directed by William Wyler. Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1942.

⁷⁹ Axel Madsen. *William Wyler*. 255.

⁸⁰ Mark Glancy. *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood "British" Film 1939-45*. Pgs. 94-95.

showed Americans a reflection of themselves; their social, political, economic, and religious values permeated the characters in this fictional British town. Through utilizing a foreign people and setting to relate the superiority of American ideals, *Mrs. Miniver* accomplished something unique among many other contemporary works.

WWII-Era Film: Japan

Narratives of America's superiority and exceptionalism varied slightly depending on the nation or society held up in comparison. In the case of films that dealt with Russia made in the years leading up to the Soviet-American alliance, these narratives primarily centered upon the superiority of America's political ideals and institutions. In films such as *Tovarich*, *Comrade X* and *Ninotchka* the Soviet political system is the true enemy. The Russians in these films certainly come across as brutish and sinister, yet not beyond redemption. In fact, in each of these films the central Russian characters experience some sort of moral or ideological transformation. In the case of Germany however, WWII-era films primarily highlighted the superiority of American morality and social ideals. Films like *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *The Man I Married*, *Casablanca* or *Mrs. Miniver*, deliver mostly one-dimensional representations of Germans. They show them as a people acquainted with the mores of civilized Western democracies, but who callously dismiss them and retain no regard for the value of freedom or human life. Yet regardless of the specific combination, all Hollywood representations of America's

enemies relied on portraying their racial, moral, and political inferiority. This is particularly apparent in the WWII-era films that depict the Japanese.

According to the *Government Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, “The power, cruelty and complete cynicism of the enemy should be pictured, but it is dangerous to portray all Germans, all Italians, and all Japanese as bestial barbarians.”⁸¹ Despite the OWI’s official stance on excessively villainous or racial portrayals of America’s enemies, Hollywood nevertheless managed to create and distribute visual narratives of their racial and moral bankruptcy.⁸² The Japanese proved a favorite target of screenwriters and directors in this regard. Unlike the Russians or the Germans, Hollywood possessed no long-standing history or methodology for portraying the Japanese in film. Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in the early 1930s drew harsh criticism in American media outlets. Newspapers and magazines featured expository columns complete with photographs and political cartoons that highlighted Japanese barbarity towards their Asian neighbors.⁸³ However, few criticisms or representations of Japan that circulated in print media made their way onto movie screens through the 1930s and early 1940s. In fact, Hollywood encountered difficulty in portraying any East Asian peoples in its films from this era.⁸⁴ The film *Mr. Moto’s Gamble* (1937) featuring the fictional Chinese movie character Charlie Chan and the Japanese agent Mr. Moto stands as a prominent example this Asian conflation. In their own respective film series

⁸¹ *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*. Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures. “Section II: Our Enemies.”

⁸² Shull and Wilt. *Hollywood War Films*. 249.

⁸³ Michael Hunt. *Ideology and US Foreign Policy*. (New Haven CT.: Yale University Press. 1987), 140-145.

⁸⁴ McLaughlin and Parry. *Well Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*. Pg. 67-68.

released throughout the 1930s, the on-screen detective characters Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto drew large audiences through their novel approach to solving cases. In *Mr. Moto's Gamble* the two Asian sleuths join forces for the first time to expose an illegal gambling ring. Though distinct from one another in their specific skills and personalities, the Chinese detective Chan (played by Caucasian actor Warner Oland) and Japanese agent Moto (played by Caucasian actor Peter Lorre) appear on screen as natural-born allies. In fact, throughout many of the films featuring Chan and Moto separately, the representations of each hero bear striking similarities.⁸⁵⁸⁶ In their appearance, speech and mannerisms, Lorre and Oland represent a collective “oriental” type. Both characters possess a servile modesty that belies their talents and skills, which they quietly use to their advantage as their Western counterparts overlook and underestimate them. Ironically, many of these “oriental” characteristics seen in the Moto films of the 1930s shifted quite suddenly from being positive to negative qualities.

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the December issue of *Time Magazine* featured a column entitled “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs.” This column attempted to provide tips for distinguishing the various Asian nationalities; “The Chinese are not as hairy as the Japanese, they seldom grow an impressive moustache. The Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive,

⁸⁵ *Think Fast Mr. Moto*. Directed by Norman Foster. 20th Century Fox Corporation. Released 1937. See also, *Thank You Mr. Moto*. 1938.

⁸⁶ *Charlie Chan's Chance*. Directed by John Blystone, Fox Film Corporation. Released 1932. See also *Charlie Chan's Secret*. Directed by Gordon Wiles. 20th Century Fox Corporation. Released 1936.

dogmatic, arrogant.”⁸⁷ Entries such as this highlight Americans’ widespread inability at the time to distinguish Asian races. As such, Hollywood had much ground to cover to shape and spread conceptual narratives that applied to America’s new Japanese enemy. One of the more ubiquitous and enduring narratives that Hollywood studios latched onto soon after Pearl Harbor was one that characterized the Japanese as a deceitful and duplicitous people. The obsequiousness of Mr. Moto in pre-1941 films transformed into a mask for something sinister in many subsequent Japanese characters. And like the Germans or Russians, Hollywood portrayals of Japanese civilians and soldiers propagated racial stereotypes, but did so to a much greater degree.

American movie audiences possessed a certain lack of familiarity not only with the Japanese as a people, but also with the Pacific theater of war in general. As such, many Hollywood films from this era often centered upon particular places or battles in the Pacific that moviegoers likely heard in the news but otherwise knew little about. This allowed screenwriters and directors a factual foundation upon which to construct fictional narratives. Republic was one of the first production companies to capitalize off of this with their May 1942 release of *Remember Pearl Harbor*. While the action in this film centers around the Pacific theater, little of the plot has anything to do with Pearl Harbor. Rather, the story follows a disgraced army officer (Donald Barry) as he stumbles upon a clandestine plot to attack the American Navy. The film utilizes familiar tropes in developing a protagonist that finds redemption through exhibition of courage and self-

⁸⁷ Quoted in McLaughlin and Parry. *Well Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*. Pg. 123.

sacrifice when the moment demands. It also casts Japanese characters as single-minded and treacherous, capitalizing on public suspicion and distrust.⁸⁸ Although the film made good time in getting to screens nationwide, it fell somewhat flat and left audiences with little worth remembering. New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther echoed this assessment yet concluded his review with a bit of foreshadowing, "Guess we'll just have to accept it as the first of the Far Easterns. There'll be more."⁸⁹ Indeed, more followed, and the narratives found in *Remember Pearl Harbor* recurred and expanded in Hollywood's subsequent productions.

One of the more successful films of 1942 was another of the "Far Easterns." Released in August of 1942, Paramount's *Wake Island* was one of the top-grossing films of the year.⁹⁰ This production also sought to build on recent developments in the Pacific theater. Opening with several lines citing the Records of the US Marine Corps, *Wake Island* screenwriters W. R. Burnett and Frank Butler clearly desired for audiences to connect the plot with real events. They emphasize this connection even further with an epitaph following the opening credits:

"In this picture the action at Wake Island has been recorded as accurately and factually as possible. America and Americans have long been used to victory but the great names of her military history: Valley Forge, Custer's Last Stand, The Lost Battalion, represent the dark hours. There, small groups of men fought savagely to the death because in dying they gave eternal life to

⁸⁸*Remember Pearl Harbor*. Directed by Joseph Santley. Released by Republic Pictures, 1942.

⁸⁹ Bosley Crowther. "The First Far Eastern" *New York Times*. June 4, 1942. Accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9805E5DA173AE233A25757C0A9609C946393D6CF>

⁹⁰ "101 Pix Gross in Millions" *Variety Magazine*. 6 Jan, 1943. p 58. Accessed online at: <https://archive.org/stream/variety149-1943-01#page/n57/mode/1up>

the ideas for which they died. Such a group was Marine Fighting Squadron 211 of Marine Aircraft Group 21 and the Wake Detachment of the First Defense Battalion, United States Marine Corps, the units which comprised the garrison at Wake Island."

The film stars Brian Donlevy, Robert Preston and William Bendix as three American Marines from the aforementioned divisions sent to defend the tiny Pacific outpost. After a brief narrative and geographic introduction, audiences witness the events and forces that draw together the sundry cadre of servicemen that occupy the island. The film also shows civilians present on the island as part of the construction company hired to build some of the island's infrastructure and defenses. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, tensions mount as those on Wake prepare for the Japanese onslaught they believe to be imminent. The plot reaches its crescendo as the heroic Americans repel initial attacks from Japanese Naval forces, however the subsequent waves of invaders prove too numerous for the valiant defenders and the island falls with the Americans fighting to the last man.

Several narrative elements weave their way throughout *Wake Island* and tie this film to the larger construct of American superiority and exceptionalism. The film's portrayal of the American citizens and servicemen on Wake carries several undertones. Though these individuals hail from various walks of life in different corners of the country, audiences witness them rally around a common cause. Major Caton (Donlevy) is a middle-aged career military man whose separation from his family left him rather jaded. By contrast, Shad McCloskey (Dekker) is a civilian and a contractor who doesn't understand or respond well to military command structure. In addition to these, several

other civilian and military characters mutually generate friction between one another as the plot develops. Yet through highlighting a diverse collection of individuals working for a common cause, the film makes Wake Island into a microcosm of America. The defenders represent a cross-section of American society. Though it is worth noting that this 'cross-section' featured virtually no minority groups and few women; it was a cross-section of white, male America.⁹¹ Through this representation the film not only suggests that members of a democratic society must look past their differences to work towards common goals, but also that those differences that make individuals unique lend strength to the group. The audience witnesses this through the ingenious contributions to the harbor's defense from the underwhelming Privates played by Preston and Bendix. By harnessing the strength and spirit of each individual who pitches in of his own freewill, the defenders on Wake outperform their homogeneous enemies despite inferior numbers and inadequate supplies. Such a narrative implies that democratic societies possess an inherent, qualitative superiority that guarantees their ultimate victory. Even though the island falls at the end of the film, the Americans who stayed to defend it do not come across as losers. Rather, according to film historian Jeanine Basinger, such an ending suggested: "we may be losers, but we never give up - and losers who never give up will finally win."⁹²

⁹¹ Bosley Crowther. "Wake Island, 'a Stirring Tribute to the United States Marines, With Brian Donlevy in the Cast, at the Rivoli Theatre.'" *The New York Times*. September 2, 1942. Accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B01EED81239E33BBC4A53DFBF668389659EDE>

⁹² Jeannine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. 31.

Wake Island also perpetuates the narrative of the Japanese as conniving and devious. This especially comes through in a couple of scenes where audiences witness a Japanese envoy meet with Donlevy's character, Maj. Caton. Hawaiian-born actor Richard Loo played the smooth-talking, smarmy Japanese ambassador who fits the two-faced stereotype perfectly. Loo often played ominous Japanese characters in the films of this era, and indeed a sense of foreboding underscored this meeting with Maj. Caton. The two cordially convene on Wake with promises of peace and cooperation on their lips, yet this only underscores the treachery that follows. The film juxtaposes Japanese rhetoric against action, emphasizing a narrative of America being "stabbed in the back." Expressions of incredulity darken the faces of Marines and civilians alike when news of Pearl Harbor reaches Wake. Such a feeling of treachery leads Maj. Caton to declare that "wherever they've dropped a stick of bombs, they've made thousands like us – men without wives, without children, without a single thing they've ever loved or held dear. And for those men there's a job to do: to fight." This sense of vengeance provides a driving force for the remainder of the film's plot and reinforces audiences' perception of Japan.

Yet it is the virtue and character of the American servicemen that occupies center-stage in this feature. As implied in the opening sequences, the film latches onto the theme of a doomed resistance and draws connections with other 'last-stand' battles in American history. Like their forefathers of old, the Marines and civilians in *Wake Island* rise to extraordinary and almost super-human levels of heroism and bravado in the face of sure destruction. Audiences see this through Albert Dekker's character Shad

McCloskey, a civilian who decides to stay with the island's defenders and fight to the last instead of accepting transport back to the mainland. Or through the actions of Preston and Bendix's characters and their comrades who adopt a Spartan-like defiance to their attackers, responding to demands of surrender with "Tell 'em to come and get us." The film closes with a close-up looking down the barrel of a machine gun at the determined Marines who, surrounded and outnumbered, continue firing as the shot fades to the closing credits. Scenes such as these play upon American patriotic fervor and showcase the courage, sacrifice, and valor that patriotism demands.

The impact of such a portrayal is twofold. On the one hand the film is true to the realities facing American servicemen at the time and honors the sacrifices these men made. Yet on the other hand it intentionally overextends the narrative and builds a fictional perception of America's fighting forces. Through showing the Marines defiantly resisting to their dying breath defending the island, the film aggrandizes the valor and heroics of American soldiers to unrealistic levels. This was an intentional construction. The Japanese did indeed seize control of Wake Island in December of 1941 and hundreds of US Marines fell in the prolonged defense. However, upon exhausting all means and methods of resisting, a sizeable group of some 1,500 Marines surrendered to Japanese forces and became prisoners of war.⁹³ The directors and screenwriters knew this, in fact they even discussed holding the film's release on the possibility that US

⁹³ Thomas Zeiler. *Annihilation: A Global Military History of WWII*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2011), 165-166.

forces might retake the island and allow for an alternate ending. But filmmakers ignored the reality of the surrender in favor of a heroic, fictional last-stand.

Through creating a palpable sense of realism that adhered to historical record and then inserting specific plot devices that magnify American valor, *Wake Island* further enhanced a narrative of American superiority. Although the doomed effort portrayed did not accurately reflect events, it generated a significant amount of commercial and critical interest. The film reached over 3.5 million dollars in domestic sales within 6 months.⁹⁴ It also received four Oscar nominations in 1942, for Best Picture, Best Director (John Farrow), Best Screenplay (W.R. Burnett and Frank Butler), and Best Supporting Actor (William Bendix).⁹⁵ Three weeks after its initial release, New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther captured the cumulative effect of this narrative construct in his review of *Wake Island*: "Here is a film which should surely bring a surge of pride to every patriot's breast. And here is a film for which its makers deserve a sincere salute. Except for the use of fictional names and a very slight contrivance of plot, it might be a literal document of the manner in which the Wake detachment of Marines fought and died in the finest tradition of their tough and indomitable corps."⁹⁶ Taken together, *Wake Island*'s narrative elements along with its favorable reception made the

⁹⁴ "101 Pix Gross in Millions" *Variety Magazine*. 6 Jan, 1943. p 58.

⁹⁵ "The 15th Academy Awards, 1943." *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Online Archive accessed at: <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1943>

⁹⁶ Bosley Crowther. "Wake Island,' a Stirring Tribute to the United States Marines, With Brian Donlevy in the Cast, at the Rivoli Theatre."

film a powerful conduit for developing and perpetuating common perceptions of America and its enemies.

Following *Remember Pearl Harbor* and *Wake Island*, Hollywood producers sustained a steady output of war titles set in the Pacific theater. Some of these took a straightforward approach to reassuring audiences of the heroism of their fighting men abroad and the justice of their cause. Films such as MGM's *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), Warner Bros.' *Air Force* (1943), and 20th Century Fox's *Wing and a Prayer* (1944) all construct ultra-heroic narratives around American servicemen. Such films relied upon the virility and force of personality displayed through the protagonists. This tendency comes across quite clearly in the several films starring John Wayne, (Republic's *Flying Tigers* and *The Flying Seabees*, and RKO's *Back to Bataan*). With a confident swagger, cool demeanor, and rugged manliness, Wayne, along with many other young white actors, embodied the ideal version of the American soldier. Other Pacific theater films went a step further and contrasted American valor with Japanese villainy. Such films include Universal's *Gung Ho* (1943), 20th Century Fox's *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943), and MGM's *Bataan* (1943). These films exposed audiences further to America's fanatical, simian-like Japanese enemy. Complete with buck-teeth and thick-rimmed eyeglasses, films like these portrayed the Japanese through highly racialized caricatures.⁹⁷ Irrational, deceitful and barbaric, Japanese soldiers occupied a sub-human classification through the Hollywood camera lens.

⁹⁷ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II*. 50, 51.

In addition to portraying the racial and moral disparities between American and Japanese soldiers, Hollywood through this era also emphasized political and ideological distinctions as well. Many of the films mentioned above utilized similar plot devices in order to highlight such distinctions. *Wake Island*, *Bataan*, *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Air Force*, and *Gung Ho* for example, all featured a cast of soldiers meant to represent a cross-section of American society. Throughout these films audiences watched as the disparate cadres banded together in the face of war and utilized their individual talents in the collective struggle.⁹⁸ Such a portrayal celebrated and emphasized the importance of the individual, a foundational principle to any liberal democracy. Through witnessing these individuals work together to overcome a tyrannical, single-minded enemy like the Japanese, Hollywood sold audiences on the superiority of democratic societies. Each film of this era featuring the Pacific theater hammered home remarkably similar, increasingly familiar themes regarding American soldiers and the ideals they defended. 20th Century Fox's *The Purple Heart* stands out as one of the best and most successful examples of such films. It embodies the artful incorporation of propaganda that builds upon and extends narratives about America and Japan.⁹⁹

The Purple Heart follows a crew of American airmen downed in the Pacific and taken to Japan as prisoners. The film's director, the legendary Lewis Milestone, possessed a long-standing reputation in Hollywood for directing the 1930 anti-war classic, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Yet the tone of his films and career took quite a

⁹⁸ McLaughlin and Parry. *Well Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*. Pgs. 75, 82, 96-97.

⁹⁹ Robert Fyne. *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II*. 63.

turn during WWII. Born in Russia to a Jewish family, Milestone had many reasons to abhor Hitler and Nazism and it came through in the many films he directed or wrote through the war years. His work on *The Purple Heart* is a poignant example of the ways he used narrative and thematic devices to foster patriotism and a loathing for America's enemies.¹⁰⁰ Released in 1944, this film like *Wake Island* seeks to ground its plot in real events from the Pacific war. It stars Dana Andrews as Captain Harvey Ross and Richard Conte, Farley Granger, Kevin O'Shea, Red Barry, Sam Levene, Charles Russell, and John Craven as his fellow airmen. Together these characters represent the real-life flyers of the Doolittle Raid, and the film's plot unfolds around the public trials of these airmen in Japan.

The trial commences with Japanese military officials levelling charges against the Americans for targeting civilians during their bombing raid. Based on circumstantial evidence and the solitary testimony of a Chinese defector who rendezvoused with the airmen and betrayed them to the Japanese, the charges appear quite dubious. Two military commanders from the Japanese Army and Navy respectively, bring these charges against the American prisoners who protest their unlawful subjection to trial by a civil court. The trial proceeds despite their protests and upon their unwillingness to give the information the court desires, the Americans experience waves of torture and interrogation. Japanese Army General Mitsubi (Richard Loo) occupies a villainous role as the principal tormentor, promising to force the prisoners to testify. He wants them to

¹⁰⁰ Lary May. *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2000), 66, 96.

testify not only in a way that condemns themselves, but that also verifies their point of origin, the carrier USS. Hornet, and thus affix blame for the successful Doolittle Raid on the Imperial Navy. Much of the subsequent plot develops around the torture, mutilation, and ongoing trial of the airmen. Throughout the ordeal audiences witness Andrews and his comrades deal with not only physical abuse but also severe psychological trauma. Yet through all of it, the Americans maintain a stoic dedication to one another and to their country. When it appears that the men can take no more, the court offers them one final opportunity to reveal what they know and receive military imprisonment, or else face execution. In a dramatic climax, the heroes convene privately to decide their fate and determine to vote anonymously by placing their aviator's wings in a jar. When removed from the jar in front of the court, a pair of broken wings would indicate that someone wishes to talk and spare the group a certain death. Tension mounts as the Americans stand in court watching the wings come out of the jar one by one until the final pair emerges, intact, just as every pair before it. With this final scene, *The Purple Heart* utilizes the familiar theme of a doomed and heroic American resistance.

Through their respective roles, Richard Loo (Mitsubi) and Dana Andrews (Ross) provide the ideological clash that is the cornerstone of this film. Even-tempered and confident with a neat appearance and strong, clear voice, Ross is the archetypal serviceman. Even though he and his comrades are captives, they come across poised and equanimous in contrast to their manic Japanese captors. In several scenes, Capt. Ross holds calmly and dutifully to defiant silence, despite Mitsubi's ever-escalating

insistence that resistance is foolish and that the information he wants will not jeopardize the American cause. More so than any other film from this era, *The Purple Heart* delivers extensive and graphic scenes that depict torture and mutilation. One serviceman endures the smashing of his finger and hands, another has his tongue cut out, and guards beat another to nearly a vegetative state. Through all this the audience witnesses the moral dilemma and debate between the American protagonists over the extent to which duty compels them to remain silent. In the face of such brutality, their devotion and moral integrity borders on the realm of super-human. As evidenced through verbal exchanges with their captors and their decision to vote when deciding their fate, these soldiers demonstrate their love of liberty and democracy. To further underscore the morality of their cause, as the soldiers cast their votes a choir of voices invades the silence with a rousing hymnal chorus. With echoes of “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah” fading, the prisoners enter the courtroom in the final scene facing certain death. With a fearless and steely expression, Ross addresses the court one last time and delivers a summation of the American character:

“It's true we Americans don't know very much about you Japanese, and never did. And now I realize you know even less about us. You can kill us, all of us, or part of us, but if you think that will put fear into the United States of America and stop them from sending other flyers to bomb you, you're wrong, dead wrong. They'll come by night and by day, thousands of them. They will blacken your skies and burn your cities to the ground and make you get down on your knees and beg for

mercy. This is your war. You wanted it. You asked for it. You started it. Now you're going to get it!"¹⁰¹

Ross' comrades greet this speech with a rousing cheer, and with their fate sealed the prisoners proudly march from the courtroom as the Air Force anthem slowly fades in. These brave and honorable airmen represented not only the Doolittle fliers, but all servicemen who went to meet the enemy. Through standing united in their resolve, Capt. Ross and company represented the capabilities of America as a nation through devotion to its ideals and principles.

In addition to representing the exceptional integrity of the American serviceman, *The Purple Heart* also delivers an in-depth look 'behind the wizard's curtain' at Japan's cultural, political, and military structures. The courtroom provides the key backdrop for this. The set itself possesses many components familiar to an American audience such as jurors, judges, prosecutors and defendants. Yet these clash with distinctly Japanese elements such as the judges' traditional clothing and long beards or the massive Rising Sun mural that hangs behind the bench. Through these and other devices the film depicts the Japanese sense of justice as distorted and arcane. In one courtroom scene the judges receive a letter in the middle of the proceedings announcing the capture of Corregidor from Gen. MacArthur. As they read the message the judges shout the news and lead chants of "Bonsai!" All around the courtroom people echo the celebration while the soldiers and guards draw their samurai swords and engage in a wild, ritualistic-

¹⁰¹ *The Purple Heart*. Directed by Lewis Milestone. Distributed by 20thCentury Fox Entertainment, 1944.

looking choreography. In scenes such as this, the film underscores how such uncivilized, animalistic behavior belies a general disregard for justice and rule-of-law.

Just as Dana Andrews represents the archetype of the American soldier, so Richard Loo (Mitsubi) represents American narratives and popular perceptions of the Japanese. Next to Andrews, Loo appears small, easily rattled, and unsightly; complete with exaggerated facial features such as narrowed eyes, pronounced front teeth and a distinct accent. From the beginning of the film Mitsubi, along with other military figures in the courtroom, come across as single-minded, goose-stepping caricatures. Through his petty rivalry with the Admiral, audiences witness Mitsubi invoke the ancient and stereotypical practice of Hara-kiri (ritual suicide) should he fail to produce a confession from the prisoners that incriminates the Imperial Navy. Mitsubi's manic level of commitment borders on delusion and comes through in his hyper-nationalistic monologues. While questioning Capt. Ross, he spells out reasons for his ardent belief in Japan's cause and eventual victory:

"No, Captain. Japan is united in this war through emperor-worship and hate - hate for all foreigners, white or otherwise. The Japanese will win. He wears wood-fiber clothes, cardboard shoes. He cheerfully eats one third of his usual diet. He works 14 hours a day, seven days a week. And our soldiers - ask your troops at Bataan. We do not leave any place that we want. You must kill us. We will win this war because we are willing to sacrifice 10 million lives. How many lives is the white man willing to sacrifice?"¹⁰²

¹⁰² See: *The Purple Heart*. Directed by Lewis Milestone.

Through this and other interactions, audiences observe exaggerated and racialized portrayals of Japanese 'other-ness.' Mitsubi and his compatriots criticize and ridicule both American racial identity as well as political ideals. Yet through the portrayal of Japanese versus American behavior, the film draws distinct lines that showcase American superiority. Upon his prisoners' decision to remain silent and accept execution, Mitsubi realizes his failure and follows through on his promise, shooting himself in the middle of the courtroom. This again reinforces the narrative of Japanese barbarity and a bastardized view of honor and morality. Through building stereotyped characters and centering them within recent wartime events, *The Purple Heart* convincingly reinforces prevailing narratives regarding America and Japan.

Conclusion

In 2014 Hollywood icon Clint Eastwood directed one of the most popular war films of all time, *American Sniper*. Featuring Bradley Cooper in the lead role, the film followed the life and tragic death of Chris Kyle, a sniper and Navy SEAL who served four tours of duty in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Adapted from Kyle's autobiography, the film rapidly generated astonishing sales and attendance figures. *American Sniper* not only led Hollywood box-office sales in 2014 but also broke all-time domestic sales records for a war film; a record held by Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*

since 1998.¹⁰³ Additionally the film received recognition from the Academy, picking up six Oscar nominations in 2015 including Best Picture, Best Writing, and Best Actor.¹⁰⁴ Though *American Sniper* stirred considerable controversy and criticism over its simplistic portrayal of the war in Iraq and the actions US military, it did nothing to curb public enthusiasm for the film.¹⁰⁵ Few directors and producers can claim to match what Eastwood achieved in terms of public reception with *American Sniper*, especially when considering the typical performance of films about the US war and occupation in Iraq. For point of comparison, one of the most critically acclaimed Iraq-war films, *The Hurt Locker* (2008), pulled in 17 million dollars in domestic ticket sales within its first 6 months; *American Sniper* took in 350 million within the same time frame.¹⁰⁶

The factor that most clearly accounts for this unprecedented public reception is *American Sniper's* repackaging of all-too-familiar ideological elements. Rather than taking a critical approach to examining the war's myriad of physical, political, moral, or psychological consequences, the film plays up the personal struggles of the protagonist. On the screen, Kyle comes across as an unflappable hero. He is an ardent patriot, loyal friend, family man and a tremendously gifted and effective soldier who does not falter in his duties. To its credit, the film portrays many tragic instances where the violence of

¹⁰³ Brian Stelter. "'American Sniper' now ranks as No. 1 war movie at the box office." *CNN Money*. February 2015. Accessed at: <http://money.cnn.com/2015/02/02/media/american-sniper-box-office/>

¹⁰⁴ "The 87th Academy Awards, 1943." *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Online Archive accessed at: <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2015>

¹⁰⁵ Matt Taibbi. "American Sniper is Almost Too Dumb to Criticize." *Rolling Stone*, January 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/american-sniper-is-almost-too-dumb-to-criticize-20150121>

¹⁰⁶ "Box office / business for American Sniper" *International Movie Database*. Online archive accessed at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2179136/business?ref=tt_ql_dt_4

war extends to women and children and they consequently come directly into the line of fire. Yet the complex moral questions that arise with these scenes seem to fit rather neatly into Kyle's worldview. Even through such tragic and unfortunate experiences, Kyle remains steadily confident that he performed his duty by engaging the enemy and protecting his comrades. Kyle's relentless devotion to duty in the face of controversy recurs throughout the film and serves not only to mythologize his character, but also to bolster an ideological narrative about America's position in the ongoing conflict.

From the outset, the film reminds audiences of the unique role that America and its fighting forces occupy in the world. The film's second scene flashes back to Chris Kyle's childhood. In it audiences witness a montage of impactful childhood experiences overlaid with the voice of Kyle's father Wane proffering his worldview:

"There are three types of people in this world. Sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn't exist in the world, and if it ever darkened their doorstep they wouldn't know how to protect themselves... those are the sheep. Then you got predators who use violence to prey on the weak. They're the wolves. Then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression and an overpowering need to protect the flock. These men are the rare breed that live to confront the wolf—They are the sheepdog."¹⁰⁷

This philosophy is the backbone of the film's key characters and its narrative. Through his childhood and adult years Kyle learns to embrace this philosophy and the calling it places on him, and on all patriotic Americans by extension, to be the 'sheepdog.'

¹⁰⁷ *American Sniper*. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures. 2014.

It is no wonder that *American Sniper* was a runaway success in terms of popularity, as it so thoroughly espoused the ideals of American Exceptionalism that perennially prove to win public favor. Despite the way they dilute the complex realities of war, such narratives generate broad public appeal. This notion of America as uniquely “blessed” with the strength, courage, and desire to be the benevolent defender of ‘sheep’ perfectly aligns with the exceptionalist ideology of the WWII era. Chris Kyle’s on-screen character blends in seamlessly with protagonists from generations ago. Like *Wake Island’s* Maj. Caton or *Purple Heart’s* Captain Ross, Kyle pursues his duty even through the fiercest combat and dire circumstances and pays the ultimate sacrifice for his country. Likewise, *Sniper’s* Iraqi antagonists embody the same single-minded barbarism and other-ness that characterized the villains in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *Comrade X*, or *Ms. Miniver*. Though the circumstances differ, the underlying ideology remains constant. Championing the valor and meritorious character of America’s fighting men while presenting the enemy as unilaterally ruthless, both past and present Hollywood films promulgate consistent narratives of American superiority. Filmmakers tailored these narratives of superiority according to the nationality of their film’s antagonists to best exemplify America’s exceptional qualities. In films featuring Russian or German villains, the superiority of America’s moral ethos and political institutions took center stage. In films featuring Japanese antagonists, racial characteristics colored the representation of American superiority. Yet in every case the theme of exceptionalism remained undiluted and consistent, serving to propagate ideology and shape public thought.

During the 1940s, the US government through the OWI and BMP maintained a broad regulatory network over the domestic film industry and could secure or deny financial incentives. This directly impacted the productions of the era, steering many away from anything critical or anti-patriotic. Such unprecedented influence leaves room for argument that perhaps the exceptionalist themes pervading so many Hollywood productions of the WWII era were the direct result of government censorship and propaganda. That the ubiquitous use of similar ideological narratives was an example of top-down influence. However, a film like *American Sniper* offers a counterexample to this line of reasoning. In an era when it is quite common and even laudable to criticize government policy or to portray the harsh realities of war, Eastwood struck a chord by sticking with the classic exceptionalist narrative. At some level the movie-going public in America responds to such ideological narratives because they resonate or identify with them. As it appears in movies, American Exceptionalism remains a consistent ideological undertone because it is something audiences believe. From its earliest days, the film industry shaped the patterns and methods of its use, and the cinematic golden age of the 1940s sharpened these methods as never before to galvanize and mobilize America to become the 'sheepdog' of the world. This unparalleled extension of American influence around the globe became one of the dominant features of the latter 20th century. How long this will last remains unseen, but the notion that America is a beacon of liberty to the world, "a city on a hill," remains in the public mind. That narrative may remain in American cinema for years to come.

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