

Confessions of a Nazi Spy: Warner Bros., Anti-Fascism and the Politicization of Hollywood

by Steven J. Ross

Sometimes a single movie can awaken the political consciousness of a nation. The opening of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 ignited protests and heated debates throughout the country. Twenty-four years later, the opening of Warner Bros.' *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, the first film to portray Nazis as a threat to America, sparked equally passionate responses. "The evening of April 27, 1939," declared film critic Welford Beaton, "will go down in screen history as a memorable one. It marked the first time in the annals of screen entertainment that a picture ever really said something definite about current events, really took sides and argued for the side with which it sympathized." In an emotional memo to Jack Warner, producer Lou Edelman proudly told his boss, "Last night, the motion picture had a Bar Mitzvah. It came of age. It said, 'Today I am a man.' *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was proud of what it had to say and how it said it, and the world was very articulate in its approval, and compliments to the courage that it took to say it."¹

Not everyone was enamored with the film. Nazi sympathizers in Milwaukee burned down the local Warner Bros. theater shortly after the movie opened. Angry citizens in other cities picketed theaters, slashed seats and threatened exhibitors. In Poland, anti-Semitic audiences hanged several theater owners in their movie houses for exhibiting the film. Nazis banned the film everywhere they could exert pressure. For many people, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* was more than just another movie.²

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

Confessions of a Nazi Spy was a milestone in American cinema. It was the first major studio production to take an explicit stand on foreign policy and warn Americans about the dangers of a particular regime. Film scholars refer to the 1930s as the "Golden Age of Hollywood," a time when films were at their lavish best. But the 1930s were also the decade when Hollywood emerged as a major force in the nation's political life. Movie stars used their celebrity to bring attention to the dangers posed by fascists abroad and at home. Although anti-fascist celebrities were able to reach tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Americans, politically engaged filmmakers wanted to reach millions. And no movie moguls were more committed to fighting fascism than Harry and Jack Warner. At a time when few studios were willing to jeopardize lucrative foreign sales, the Warner brothers produced a slew of highly politicized anti-fascist films: *Black Legion* (1937), *Juarez* (1939), *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *Espionage Agent* (1939), *British Intelligence* (1940), *Sea Hawk* (1940), *Underground* (1941) and *Sea Wolf* (1941).

◀ 34. Edward G. Robinson as FBI man Edward Renard in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939).





35. An American Legionnaire (Ward Bond) confronts Nazis at a Bund meeting in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939).



36. Harry Warner and Louis B. Mayer at a Red Cross fundraiser in 1940.

This article examines the events that led to the making of *Confessions* and the variety of reactions the studio encountered as it tried to disseminate powerful messages to millions of Americans. The Warners' films proved so powerful that they prompted congressional investigations of propaganda in motion pictures before and after World War II—investigations that sent a chilling warning throughout the motion picture industry about the dangers of political activism.

The Rise of Anti-Fascist Hollywood

The 1930s did not mark the beginning of political activity in Hollywood. From the opening of the first nickelodeon in 1905, movies and movie stars did more than simply entertain audiences. They represented a new means of political communication for a new century, a dangerous, and what many authorities regarded as a revolutionary, means of communication that spoke directly to millions of Americans. Although silent films dealt with a wide variety of contentious political issues, movie stars generally avoided the political spotlight. Studio executives, noted Charlie Chaplin's one-time assistant, feared "that if an actor took sides in any matter, he was bound to alienate a portion of his public. And that was bad, as (theater magnate) Sid Grauman would have said, 'for the old box officeroo.'"³

Celebrity attitudes toward politics changed in the 1930s as the devastating effects of the Great Depression, the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the rapid spread of fascism in Europe politicized millions of Americans and generated an unprecedented era of Hollywood activism. As conditions at home and abroad worsened, movie industry personnel began to question their responsibility as citizens to stand up for ideas and causes they believed in, or against forces they felt threatened American democracy. Given the large numbers of Jews, European émigrés, liberals and radicals that populated Hollywood in the 1930s, it is not surprising that anti-fascism emerged as the focal point of political action.

Hatred of fascism led Hollywood liberals, communists and some Republicans to organize a wide range of progressive "Popular Front" groups—the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (formed in April 1936), the Motion Picture Artists Committee to Aid Republican Spain (which had 15,000 members at its peak) and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. The Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, whose leaders included Melvyn Douglas, Frederick March, Paul Muni, James

Cagney, Sylvia Sydney and Gloria Stuart, had an estimated 4,000 members and mounted frequent demonstrations, sponsored weekly radio shows, published their own newspaper and blockaded meetings of the Los Angeles German-American Bund. "There is hardly a tea party today," Ella Winter wrote in January 1938, "or a cocktail gathering, a studio lunch table or dinner even at a producer's house at which you do not hear agitated discussion, talk of 'freedom' and 'suppression,' talk of tyranny and the Constitution, of war, of world economy and political theory."⁴

Hollywood's actors, writers, directors and producers were at the forefront of internationalist politics at a time when most Americans were still isolationists. A poll in November 1936 reported that 95% of Americans were opposed to United States participation in any potential war. Three years later, a Gallup poll found that 42% of the public thought it more important to investigate American war propaganda than to investigate the spread of Nazism, fascism or communism in America.⁵

The Warner Brothers and the Rise of Anti-Fascist Cinema

Committed anti-fascists knew they had to reach millions of Americans if they hoped to alter isolationist attitudes. Consequently, off-screen political activities were accompanied by on-screen activism. Harry and Jack Warner were the unquestioned leaders of the anti-fascist cinematic crusade. No studio moguls were more devotedly anti-fascist and willing to put their money on the line than the Warner brothers. As Jack told a reporter in August 1936, studios "should strive for pictures that provide something more than a mere idle hour or two of entertainment."⁶

For the Warners, fighting fascism in general and anti-Semitism in particular was a deeply personal commitment. As the sons of a cobbler who fled deadly pogroms in Poland and immigrated to Baltimore in 1883, Harry and Jack, the oldest and youngest of four brothers, felt a deep commitment to helping Jews in America and abroad. While Jack supervised production at the company's Burbank studio, Harry traveled around the world setting up distribution networks. "This let him see what was happening in Germany," noted his daughter Betty.⁷ When Hitler declared an official boycott of Jewish business in April 1933 and two months later limited distribution of Hollywood films, the Warners responded by closing their German offices in July 1934 and refusing to conduct business with the Nazi regime (Paramount,

Fox and MGM continued operating there until 1939). Things got worse for German Jews in the coming years: By 1935, Nuremberg Laws classified them as an inferior race and in 1938 anti-Semitic hatred exploded in *Kristallnacht*, when German mobs burned down Jewish businesses.

Not all studio heads, not even Jewish ones like Louis B. Mayer and Adolph Zukor, were as worried about Nazism. Upon returning from Germany in 1934, MGM executive Irving Thalberg told Mayer that "a lot of Jews will lose their lives" but that "Hitler and Hitlerism will pass; the Jews will still be there." As late as August 1939, just one month prior to the Nazi invasion of Poland, Zukor told a reporter, "I don't think that Hollywood should deal with anything but entertainment. The newsreels take care of current events."⁸

During the early 1930s, Warner Bros. produced scores of social problem films dealing with domestic ills caused by the Great Depression. By the mid 1930s, they turned their attention to foreign dangers and set out to use the screen to alert the nation to threats against democracy. But they were constrained by Hollywood's self-censorship board, the Production Code Administration (PCA), and its anti-Semitic head, Joseph Breen, from making films that attacked or mocked foreign governments. Breen did little to hide his antipathy for Jews. All that was wrong with Hollywood he blamed on the "lousy Jews" and insisted that "95%...are Eastern Jews, the scum of the earth." The studio heads, he wrote in 1932, were "simply a rotten bunch of vile people with no respect for anything beyond the making of money."⁹ Breen did all he could to prevent the making of anti-Nazi films or any film with openly sympathetic reference to Jews.

The brothers soon figured out a way to get around Code restrictions: They would make obliquely anti-fascist movies based on real events. *Black Legion*, which opened in New York on January 16, 1937, told the true story of a domestic fascist organization that wrought murder and terror throughout the Midwest during the early 1930s. Reviewers easily grasped its message. "The timid cinema," wrote *Screen's* critic, "which has feinted with a couple of quick lefts and then run every time it has tangled with an anti-fascist theme, finally has landed a solid, substantial blow. In *Black Legion*, Hollywood grows up."¹⁰

Warner Bros. followed *Black Legion* with a series of historically-based films that exposed audiences to past incidents of tyranny, injustice and anti-Semitism. *They Won't Forget* (1937) told how prejudice led a

southern mob to hang Jewish factory owner Leo Frank for a murder he did not commit. *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) exposed the deep strain of anti-Semitism that pervaded French society at the turn of the century. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) was a lightly veiled anti-fascist film that heralded Robin Hood's resistance to the authoritarian rule of King John. *Juarez* (1939) depicted the valiant struggles of Mexicans who fought against the dictator Emperor Maximilian. Oblique cinematic attacks on fascism were better than nothing, but what the Warners really wanted to do was alert the nation to the danger Hitler posed to democracy at home and abroad. They found their answer early in 1938.

The Making of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*

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

The Nazi spy case was broken by G-man Leon G. Turrou, who serialized his story in the *New York Post* and then released it as a best-seller, *Nazi Spies in America* (1939). Seeing this as a golden opportunity to make a film about the dangers of Nazism, the Warners immediately contacted Turrou and bought the rights to his story. In October, Jack sent studio writer Milton Krims to New York to cover the trial with an eye toward turning it into a screenplay. By the end of December, a second draft of Krim's script, initially titled *Storm Over America*, was sent to the PCA with a special request to keep it "under lock and key when you are not actually reading it, because the German-American Bund, the German Consul and all such forces are desperately trying to get a copy of it."¹¹

The announcement of the new Warner Bros. project was followed by tremendous pressure to halt production. Dr. George Gyslling,

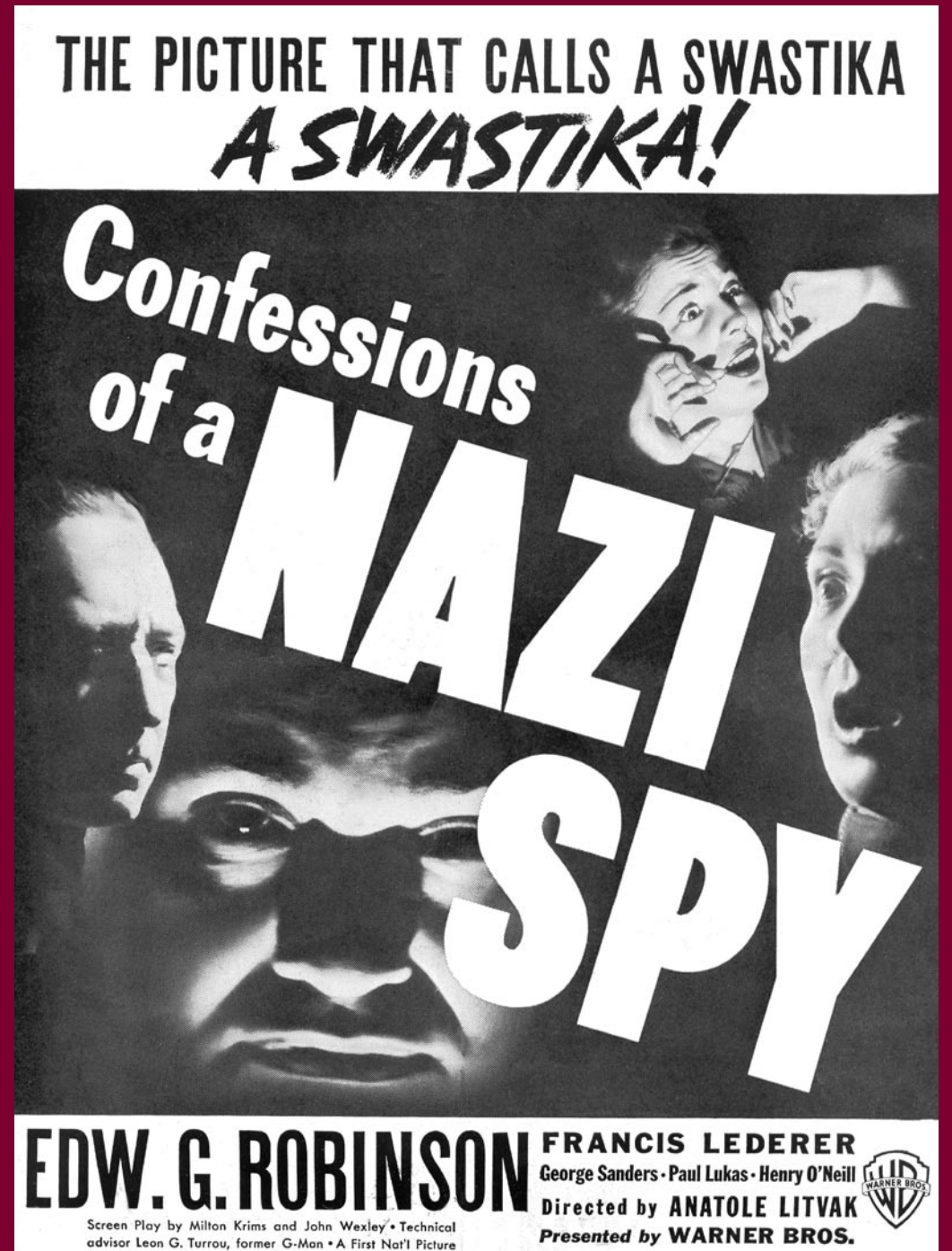
German Consul General in Los Angeles, called on PCA head Joseph Breen to stop the film from being made. Gyslling threatened that the Reich would ban all subsequent productions that featured any actors who appeared in *Confessions*.¹² Rival studio leaders were worried that Warner's anti-fascist campaign would lead the German government to ban *all* American films. Given that many studios earned 40-50% of their revenues from foreign markets, this was a dire prospect. "So far as we are concerned," Paramount Pictures executive Luigi Luraschi wrote Breen in December 1938, "our policy at the moment is that we will not attempt to make any picture that will be obviously uncomplimentary to any nation abroad."¹³

The Warners also encountered fierce opposition from PCA censors who repeatedly warned them that *Confessions* would cost them money and do irreparable harm to the film industry. "It is our thought," Breen wrote Jack Warner in December 1938, "that (censorship) boards in a number of foreign countries will not be disposed to approve the exhibition of a picture of this kind."¹⁴ After reading an earlier version of the script, PCA official Karl Lischka asked in January 1939, "Are we ready to depart from the pleasant and profitable course of entertainment, to engage in propaganda, to produce screen portrayals arousing controversy, conflict, racial, religious and nationalistic antagonism and outright, horrible human hatred?" Making this film, Lischka concluded, "will be one of the most memorable, one of the most lamentable mistakes ever made by the industry."¹⁵

Unable to persuade them with financial appeals, PCA censors tried halting the film on the grounds that it violated Code provisions which stipulated that "the history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly."¹⁶ As Lischka complained in January 1939, "To represent Hitler only as a screaming madman and a bloodthirsty persecutor, and nothing else, is manifestly unfair, considering his phenomenal public career, his unchallenged political and social achievements and his position as head of the most important continental European power."¹⁷

Warner Bros. forged ahead, refusing to bend under pressure from the PCA or their studio brethren. As Jack explained several months later, "Efforts have been made to persuade us to call off these pictures.... We do not intend to heed them. We produced the 'Nazi Spy' picture because we believed first, that it would supply dramatic entertainment and second, because we felt it exposed conditions concerning which

37. Advertising art from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939).



every American and every free man everywhere should be informed.”¹⁸ When told by one studio owner that anti-fascist movies might hurt business, Jack exclaimed, “The Silver Shirts and the Bundists and all the rest of these hoods are marching in Los Angeles right now. There are high school kids with swastikas on their sleeves a few crummy blocks from our studio. Is that what you want in exchange for some crummy film royalties out of Germany?”¹⁹

Warner Bros. began filming on February 1, 1939, several days after Breen reluctantly granted them tentative script approval.²⁰ In April, after screening the film for PCA officials, they received Breen’s final, albeit reluctant, approval. But the brothers did have to make one concession. They could not explicitly mention the plight of German Jews or their sufferings at the hands of Hitler and his minions.

Anyone watching the film today is not likely to see this as a transgressive production. Yet at the time, the film was considered so dangerous and the studio received so many threatening letters after announcing production plans—over 100—that Warner Bros. hired special policemen to keep visitors off the set throughout the filming and released almost no publicity. Even the names of the cast members and crew were kept secret for a long time. A number of actors refused parts in the film, fearing reprisals by Nazis against relatives in Germany. On the other hand, the Warners attracted talented people who were politically committed to making the film. Director Anatole Litvak and actor Paul Lukas were anti-fascist German émigrés; actor Edward G. Robinson and co-writer John Wexley were members of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. By being part of this film, Robinson told a reporter, “I feel that I am serving my country just as effectively as if I shouldered a gun and marched away to war.”²¹

On opening night, fearing violence from German and fascist groups, Warner Bros. hired hundreds of plainclothes detectives and scattered them throughout the theater. The movie arrived at the Warner Bros. Theater in an armored car under heavy police guard. The fear of being associated with so controversial a film dimmed the usual celebrity turnout. As one reporter revealed, numerous studios “secretly warned their big stars that it might not be good policy to be photographed at the preview or reported among the audience.” Louis B. Mayer, who strongly opposed the Warners’ propaganda picture, threw a “surprise” birthday party for Lionel Barrymore on opening night and ordered all MGM luminaries to appear at the gala.²²

Confessions of a Nazi Spy: The Movie and Its Reception

Confessions of a Nazi Spy employs a docudrama style to give it a sense of verisimilitude. The film opens with a voice over in the style of the popular March of Time newsreels. The narrator recounts the recent uncovering of a Nazi spy ring and proceeds to describe the events leading to the capture and subsequent trial of the spies. The film then cuts to a small Scottish town in 1937, where the seemingly innocent looking Mrs. Mary MacLaughlin acts as a conduit for a Nazi spy system that sends and receives letters from agents throughout the world—including the United States. In the next scene, we see Dr. Karl Kassel (played by Paul Lukas) addressing a German-American Bund meeting in New York City. He speaks in a high voltage manner similar to Hitler’s and in a room filled with Nazi flags and swastikas. His speech ends with the frenzied audience rising to its feet and saluting, “*Sieg Heil*,” while a band plays “*Deutschland Über Alles*.” Although Kassel professes his love for America, he is really a Nazi spy who loathes the United States. As he tells Bund members, America is “a basically uncultured country” and if it is ever to be truly free “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.”²³

The film cuts to the story of Kurt Schneider (played by Czechoslovakian-born Francis Lederer), an unemployed émigré and former U.S. soldier who agrees to work as a spy for the German Naval Intelligence Service. He is handled by spymaster Franz Schlager (George Sands) who is accompanied to America by two Gestapo thugs who look like they came right out of a Warner Bros. gangster film. Schlager asks Schneider to obtain secret codes for land-plane communications and to find out the number of military troops stationed in New York. Schneider does so and is paid the paltry sum of \$50 for his efforts (the Nazis are cheap as well as nefarious). Kassel is soon ordered back to Germany and asked to take charge of the entire U.S. spy network. Cutting back and forth between events in the United States and Europe, the film intersperses newsreel clips of Nazi rallies, German troops marching into Austria and Czechoslovakia, scenes from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* and footage of Bund activities in this country. Kassel is told by Josef Goebbels (Martin Kosleck) that national socialism will now wrap itself in the American flag and appear to be a defense of true Americanism. “America for Americans” is the new watchword. This

appeal to Americanism is a façade. “Racial and religious hatred must be fostered,” Goebbels instructs Kassel. “Class hatred must be encouraged in such a way that labor and the middle class will become confused and antagonistic. In the ensuing chaos we will be able to take control.” The message of the scene is clear: Nazis are actively working to undermine American peace and freedom.

FBI Agent Edward Renard (based on Leon Turrou and played by Edward G. Robinson) makes his first appearance forty three minutes into the film—a clear suggestion that the United States was not prepared for espionage on such a scale. Renard quickly makes up for lost time and captures Schneider, who eventually makes a full confession. During the next half hour, we see Renard and his fellow agents tracking down and dismantling the rest of the spy network. Unfortunately, Kassel and many of his spies escape the FBI and flee back to Germany.

The final portion of the film focuses on the courtroom trial of the four spies who were brought into custody and charged with conspiring to secure secret information about U.S. defenses. Based on actual trial transcripts, these scenes inform audiences that the conspiracy was ordered by the Nazi government itself and was not the work of freelance fascists. In his closing argument, District Attorney Kellogg (who speaks on behalf of the Warners) lambastes isolationists for their unwillingness to face reality and warns the jury—and by extension the American people—of the dangers posed by Nazi Germany.

The movie closes with Renard and Kellogg having a cup of coffee in a diner. Customers come in and discuss the final outcome of the trial. “There’s one thing they (Nazis) found out here,” says one ordinary Joe, “this ain’t Europe.” “That’s right,” adds his friend, “and the sooner we show them that the better.” As Renard turns to Kellogg and proudly exclaims, “The voice of the people,” we hear “America the Beautiful” playing in the background. The film ends and the credits roll.²⁴

Confessions premiered in Beverly Hills on April 27, 1939 to an appreciative audience that “broke into frequent expressions of its emotions, and at the close applauded with unusual and sustained enthusiasm.”²⁵ Film critics praised its political message. “The pointed and ruthless indictment of the Nazi regime is propaganda,” observed the *Motion Picture Herald*, “perhaps the strongest propaganda of which the screen is capable.” The normally conservative Louella Parsons lavishly praised the film, suggesting that in “the entire history of motion pic-

tures there has never been a screenplay filmed that has called a spade a spade so fearlessly. . .sensational and completely unexpurgated is this astounding film which Warner Bros. produced without fear of Hitler or high water.”²⁶

The Warners’ goal was to reach beyond the physical confines of Hollywood and bring their message to people throughout the world. They succeeded! Local newspapers across the nation applauded the film. An editorial in the *South Bend Tribune* suggested that “every person who claims to be a true American and a loyal citizen ought to see it at least once. . .This picture is needed to awaken these wishy-washy Americans to the fact that their national sentiments need rejuvenation.”²⁷ Harry and Jack were even more pleased with the public response to their movie. Their studio was flooded with impassioned letters from ordinary viewers—over 550 according to Harry. Norman Krochmal praised the film as “the most powerful thing that has ever been produced.” He and his brother saw it in Reading, PA, “a city which is predominantly German and Pennsylvania Dutch,” and the “audience actually stood up and applauded at the completion of the picture.” Everyone agreed that *Confessions* had given a blow to “reaction and reactionaries everywhere. Yours for more anti-fascist pictures.” The Chicago-based German-American League issued a press release extolling the film and suggesting that anyone protesting “the showing of this picture can have no reason other than his sympathy with the undermining work of the Hitler agents.”²⁸

Word from abroad was equally enthusiastic. England’s *Film Weekly* hailed *Confessions* as “Hollywood’s first frankly propaganda film” and noted that it was playing to packed houses in London at every performance. The *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* told readers that it was their “DUTY to see that everyone in your community sees it.”²⁹ Critics in Manchester, Jerusalem, Durban (South Africa) and elsewhere were equally lavish in praising the film for its unprecedented mixture of propaganda and entertainment.

Confessions also had its critics, and they hated it. Shortly after its release, German-American Bund leader Fritz Kuhn filed a \$5 million libel suit against Warner Bros. and requested a temporary injunction to halt its exhibition. He failed on both counts. Several weeks later, the German government filed official objections with Secretary of State Cordell Hull denouncing the film as pernicious propaganda that poisoned U.S.-German relations.³⁰ The New York based *Deutscher*



◀ 38. Advertising art from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939).

Weckruf Und Beobachter and *The Free American* called it “seditious propaganda” promoted by “Jewish Hollywood” that attacked God-fearing Christians while promoting the interests of “Jewish Bolshevism and all other Subversive Internationalism.”³¹ In Kansas City, 100 people, led by the city’s German Vice Consul, signed a petition calling on the city censors to ban the film.³² In other cities, as noted earlier, movie houses showing *Confessions* were picketed, exhibitors threatened and in some cases violence erupted, causing a number of exhibitors to refuse to show the film.

The Warner brothers also received angry letters from people who objected to what they saw as a biased portrait of Germany. “I call the picture gross Jewish propaganda,” a St. Louis resident wrote in June 1939. “You did not hurt anyone but you will have more people hating the Jews because a Jew produced it to show his hatred.... Shame Shame Shame.”³³ Promising that she would boycott this and all films made by Warner Bros., Ruth Hermann of Brooklyn wrote movie industry head Will Hays, “The Aryans, Americans, are not fooled by the Jewish propaganda today. We know they want to bring war with Germany and want us to fight for them. If they want to fight let them go ahead, but not include us.”³⁴

As Joseph Breen predicted, *Confessions* was banned everywhere the Nazis could exert pressure. By August 1939, a month before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the film was prohibited in Germany, Italy, Japan, Holland, Norway and Sweden. During the next year, it was banned in eighteen more countries.³⁵

Audience response may have been mixed, but industry reaction was not. Fearing the disastrous financial impact anti-fascist films might have on the European market following the outbreak of war, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association head Will Hays forbade studios that wished to receive a PCA seal from developing films with an obvious anti-Nazi bias—a ban that remained in effect from September 15, 1939 to January 1940. While most studios complied, Warner Bros. plunged ahead and produced a slew of anti-fascist films—many of which were developed before Hays’ prohibition. On September 23, 1939, they premiered *Espionage Agent*, a film whose production was completed in August. Like *Confessions*, *Espionage Agent* told the story of a Nazi spy ring (this one fictional) that planned to destroy American industrial plants, munitions factories, railroads, shipping facilities, stockyards and water supplies. Although the plot

was foiled, the film emphasized the need for American preparedness against potential attacks by Germany.³⁶

Warner Bros. developed two other anti-fascist films during the spring and summer of 1939. *British Intelligence*, released in January 1940, starred Boris Karloff as a German spy working as a butler in the home of the British premier at the end of World War I. The film featured a scene in which a German officer tells a clumsy corporal named Adolf Hitler, “You’ll be the ruination of Germany some day.”³⁷ The studio had a harder time with *Underground*, which told the story of German resistance to the Nazi regime. When Breen received the initial script on August 11, 1939, he immediately sent off a letter to Hays expressing his opposition to its blatant attack on Hitler’s regime. “There is indicated throughout the story a ruthless brutality on the part of the Nazi regime, and a complete absence of anything suggestive of freedom of speech. It is indicated that the German people, under the Nazi government, are subject to the brutal domination of an arrogant group of cheap politicians, masquerading as statesmen.” Hays apparently agreed. Final PCA approval was not granted until May 1941. The film opened to positive reviews the next month.³⁸ The studio also released two allegorical attacks on fascism and totalitarian rule. *Sea Hawk*, which opened in August 1940, portrayed Spanish King Philip as an earlier Hitler and Queen Elizabeth as the Winston Churchill of her time. In *Sea Wolf*, which premiered in March 1941, Edward G. Robinson played the tyrannical Captain Wolf Larson as “a Nazi in everything but name.”³⁹

Once the PCA ban was lifted in January 1940, several other studios, perhaps inspired by the efforts of Warner Bros., began releasing films critical of Nazi Germany and American isolationism. Louis B. Mayer, who as late as June 1939 tried to curry favor with the German government by hosting a group of Nazi newspaper editors on the MGM lot (“I couldn’t believe it,” Harry Warner wrote a friend), tried to mend his ways the next year by turning out *The Mortal Storm*, *Flight Command* and *Escape*.⁴⁰ Other productions released in 1940 included *Four Sons* (Fox), *I Married a Nazi* (Fox) and Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (United Artists).

The Price of Activism

Were *Confessions* and the other Warner anti-fascist films anything more than just an evening’s entertainment? Yes, for movies can alter

public consciousness by creating visual stereotypes that come to dominate the mind’s eye. That is, when Americans who viewed these films thought of Nazis, what was the first set of images that came to mind—kind and harmless, or evil and dangerous? The Warner brothers used the medium of film to awaken an isolationist nation to the dangers posed by foreign powers. Speaking to a gathering of 5,800 Warner employees on June 5, 1940, Harry urged his motion picture brethren to “organize to battle subversive groups boring from within to undermine the United States and make it an easy prey for the forces of Hitlerism.” Don’t “wait until it’s too late,” he warned, “act now in defense of our country and our liberty.”⁴¹

But Warner Bros. and other Hollywood activists soon learned that political courage was not always rewarded. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) repeatedly associated “Jewish” Hollywood, its movies and its anti-fascist politics with communism. Warner’s anti-fascist films and their clear intent to curry sympathy for the Allies also prompted isolationist senators to organize an Investigation of Propaganda in Motion Pictures that began on September 9, 1941. Gerald Nye of North Dakota and Bennett Clark of Missouri charged Hollywood with war-mongering and spoke of a Jewish conspiracy aimed at getting us into war. Defending his actions, an angry Harry Warner told the committee, “I will not censor...(or) conceal from the American people what is happening in the world... You can correctly charge me with being anti-Nazi. But no one can charge me with being anti-American.”⁴² Public sentiment soon turned against the committee and its hearings were canceled following Pearl Harbor and American entry into war. After World War II, a rabidly anti-communist Congress quickly forgot Hollywood’s vital contribution to the “Good War” and launched a second round of HUAC hearings that once again linked earlier anti-fascist films and activities with communist efforts to undermine American democracy. Although producers, directors, writers and stars defended their anti-Nazi stance as consistent with the best principles of American democracy, Hollywood’s political activists were forced to retreat. Jack Warner, who testified to the committee as a “friendly” witness, denounced any red presence in Hollywood and fired *Confessions* co-writer John Wexley for his alleged communist activities. Anti-Nazi League members like Edward G. Robinson, who defended their earlier actions as fully consistent with democracy and the Bill of Rights, wound up blacklisted. The successful efforts of right-wing fanatics to link Hollywood activism with communism sent a signal

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

NOTES

1. *Hollywood Spectator*, May 13, 1939; Lou Edelman to Jack Warner, April 28, 1939, Correspondence: Folder 1, Production Files, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Warner Brothers Archives, University of Southern California (hereafter, Production Files, *Confessions*, WBA).
2. Audience responses are reported in Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.’ Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 76-77.
3. Harry Crocker, *Charlie Chaplin: Man and Mime*, unpublished manuscript, chapter 15, p. 15, Harry Crocker Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA. (hereafter, AMPAS).
4. Ella Winter, “Hollywood Wakes Up,” *The New Republic*, Jan. 12, 1938, 276. The activities of Popular Front organizations are discussed in Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection* (New York: Pantheon, 1990); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997).
5. Statistics are taken from Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History Up to World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 172.
6. *New York American*, August 11, 1936.
7. Betty Warner Sheinbaum. Personal interview. November 12, 1999.
8. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1989), 338, 340.
9. Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism*, 131.
10. *Screen*, January 16, 1937.
11. Robert Lord to Joseph Breen, December 24, 1938, Production Code Administration Files for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Herrick Library, AMPAS (hereafter, PCA Files, *Confessions*).
12. Dr. George Gyssling to Joseph Breen, Nov. 23, Dec. 6, 1939, PCA Files, *Confessions*.
13. Luigi Luraschi to Joseph Breen, December 10, 1938, PCA Files, *Confessions*. The importance of foreign revenues is discussed in Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits & Propaganda Shaped WWII Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1987).
14. Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, Dec. 30, 1938, PCA Files, *Confessions*.
15. Karl Lischka Notes, *Storm Over America*, January 22, 1939, PCA Files, *Confessions*.
16. For a copy of the Code, see Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex,*

Immorality and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 347-67.

17. Lischka Notes, “Storm Over America,” January 22, 1939, PCA Files, *Confessions*.
18. Jack Warner, undated, Folder 3: Printed Materials—1939, Jack Warner Collection, Warner Brothers Archives, University of Southern California (hereafter, Jack Warner Coll.).
19. Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 50.
20. Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, January 21, 1939, PCA Files, *Confessions*.
21. *Film Weekly*, June 15, 1939.
22. *Film Weekly*, May 27, 1939.
23. All quotes are taken from the film. Although *Confessions* is not currently available in DVD or VHS format, it is occasionally shown on the Turner Classic Movie channel.
24. The film was re-released in 1940 with additional newsreel footage that showed the effects of Nazi occupation in Norway, Holland and Belgium.
25. *Hollywood Reporter*, April 28, 1939.
26. *Motion Picture Herald*, April 29, 1939; *Los Angeles Examiner*, May 5, 1939.
27. *South Bend Tribune*, May 14, 1939.
28. Norman Krochmal to Warner Bros., May 11, 1939, Folder 1, Production Files: *Confessions*; Press Statement, German-American League for Culture Inc., May 16, 1939, Folder 1, Production Files: *Confessions*, WBA.
29. *Film Weekly* (England), June 24, 1939; *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, June 3, 1939.
30. *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 6, 1939.
31. *Deutscher Weckruf Und Beobachter and The Free American* (New York), May 4, 1939, in Folder 1, Production Files: *Confessions*, WBA.
32. *Motion Picture Herald*, May 13, 1939.
33. J.P. Thompson to Warner Brothers, June 28, 1939, Folder 1, Production Files: *Confessions*, WBA.
34. Ruth Hermann to William Hays, February 3, 1939, Folder 1, Production Files: *Confessions*, WBA.
35. Reports from foreign and domestic censors can be found in the “PCA Confidential Files of Reports from Local Censor Boards,” in PCA Files, *Confessions*.
36. The film was granted official PCA approval on August 30, 1939, PCA Files, *Espionage Agent*.
37. PCA Files, *British Intelligence*.
38. Joseph Breen to Will Hays, August 22, 1939, PCA Files, *Underground*.
39. Edward G. Robinson with Leonard Spigelgass, *All My Yesterdays: An Autobiography* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973), 218; also see PCA Files for *Sea Hawk* and *Sea Wolf*.
40. Harry Warner to Sam Katz, June 27, 1939, Folder 6: Correspondence, Jack Warner Coll.
41. Reprint of Warner speech contained in Charles Einfeld to Harry Warner, June 13, 1940, Folder 7: Miscellaneous Nazi Data, Jack Warner Coll.; also see *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 6, 1940.

42. Warner quoted in Rudy Behlmer, *Inside Warner Brothers (1935-1951): The Battles, The Brainstorms, and the Bickering—From the Files of Hollywood’s Greatest Studio* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1985), 191.