



The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler

Ben Urwand

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To continue doing business in Germany after Hitler's ascent to power, Hollywood studios agreed not to make films that attacked the Nazis or condemned Germany's persecution of Jews. Ben Urwand reveals this bargain for the first time--a "collaboration" "(Zusammenarbeit)" that drew in a cast of characters ranging from notorious German political leaders such as Goebbels to Hollywood icons such as Louis B. Mayer.

At the center of Urwand's story is Hitler himself, who was obsessed with movies and recognized their power to shape public opinion. In December 1930, his Party rioted against the Berlin screening of "All Quiet on the Western Front," which led to a chain of unfortunate events and decisions. Fearful of losing access to the German market, all of the Hollywood studios started making concessions to the German government, and when Hitler came to power in January 1933, the studios--many of which were headed by Jews--began dealing with his representatives directly.

Urwand shows that the arrangement remained in place through the 1930s, as Hollywood studios met regularly with the German consul in Los Angeles and changed or canceled movies according to his wishes. Paramount and Fox invested profits made from the German market in German newsreels, while MGM financed the production of German armaments. Painstakingly marshaling previously unexamined archival evidence, "The Collaboration" raises the curtain on a hidden episode in Hollywood--and American--history.

The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler Details

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From Reader Review *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* for online ebook

Daniel says

I waited until my review in the Jewish Advocate was supplanted by a newer issue to run my review here.

Ben Urwand's history of Hollywood's tangled relationship with Nazi Germany in the 1930s is already making waves and deservedly so. It is not a perfect book, starting with its overreaching title, but it brings to light key elements of movie history that have gone unremarked until now. This is an important contribution not only to film scholarship but to our understanding of the tortuous paths many prominent American Jews followed in the first half of the 20th century.

It's not news that most of the studio founders were East European Jews. The major exceptions were Walt Disney and Darryl Zanuck, the latter of whom merged his Twentieth Century Pictures with Fox Film Company. (Founder William Fox was Jewish, but was long gone from the company.) Those who have studied how Jews have been depicted in the movies likewise have found a curious gap. The silent era had numerous Jewish characters on screen, some comic, some dramatic, some stereotypical, from D. W. Griffith's "Romance of a Jewess" (1908) to "The Jazz Singer" (1927).

However after "The House of Rothschild" (1934), Jewish characters disappeared from the screen for nearly a decade. The adaptation of the Broadway musical "Wish You Were Here," about young people vacation in the Catskills, has no Jews. When Maxwell Anderson's play "Winterset" was adapted to the screen, the character of a rabbi was changed to a philosophical old man. This has been attributed to the Jewish moguls wanting to be seen as "Americans," and facing criticism for sex and violence in the movies (the Production Code was instituted in 1934) from non-Jewish groups like the American Legion and the Legion of Decency, the latter an arm of the Catholic Church.

Now Urwand provides evidence that there was another large factor: Hollywood didn't want to mess up their sales of movies to Germany. It's probably too strong a word to claim that the executives at MGM, Paramount, and Twentieth Century Fox were "collaborators" with the Nazi regime, but they certainly were appeasers. They would routinely recut movies to remove anything German officials found offensive. Georg Gyssling, the German counsel in Los Angeles, would notify the studios and the Hays Office (the industry censorship board) when he felt a something was a "hate film." Any movie about the Great War (i.e., World War I) that depicted the Germans in a bad light would come under scrutiny. Movies like "All Quiet on the Western Front" would be recut to order. The penalty for not giving in was to have an entire studio banned from Germany, which is what happened in 1934 to Warner Bros.

What's appalling is just how far the Germans pushed and just how much the Hollywood studios bent. Louis Mayer pulled the plug on a movie adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's anti-fascist novel *It Can't Happen Here*.

Urwand points out that when the studios found they couldn't remove their German profits from the country, they would find ways to do so legally. Paramount and Twentieth Century Fox shot local newsreels that served the propaganda purposes of Germany and showed them around the world. MGM used its German assets to make loans to German companies including arms manufacturers. All the while criticism of Germany was kept off screen and nothing was permitted to show the suffering of Jews. Indeed when "The Life of Emile Zola" (1937) was made – with Yiddish stage star Paul Muni as the courageous writer who exposed the fraudulent (and antisemitic) conviction of Alfred Dreyfuss – the word "Jew" was never spoken and appears on screen for scant seconds on a document.

As if all this wasn't bad enough, Urwand also uncovers how Jewish organizations played into this, with the Anti-Defamation League lobbying studios to keep Jews off screen (as characters, not as actors) for fear that it would stir up antisemitism here and abroad. In spite of any lack of evidence to support the claim, the studios readily complied, fearing they would be accused of "special pleading."

Urwand is more historian than film scholar leading to some needless errors and oversights. "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939) is incorrectly identified as the sequel to "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936). A reference to "a Hollywood actor named Erich von Stroheim" somehow neglects to mention that he was one of the most noted filmmakers of the silent era. The all too brief list of Hollywood movies recognizing the plight of Europe's Jews once we entered the war somehow omits Ernst Lubitsch's "To Be or Not to Be," where a Polish Shakespearean troupe is fleeing the Germany invasion and a Jewish actor recites Shylock's speech for understanding and tolerance ("Hath not a Jew eyes...").

If Urwand occasionally overreaches, he gets much right, and he amply demonstrates that the industry worked closely with German officials to avoid giving offense and, in the process, remove Jews from the stories they told. The Collaboration will be a book to be reckoned with in future discussions of the films of the era.

CORRECTION: There is a discussion of "To Be or Not to Be" in the endnotes.

Stephen says

Frustratingly sad how the Hollywood studios, for the most part run by Jews, sold out and did all they could to assure their films would be shown in Nazi Germany. For a few crummy bucks. Even after American films had been banned and they had nothing to lose they chose to remain silent about the holocaust as it happened. The lack of first person accounts makes it difficult to engage with but, of course, nobody wants to talk about how they did nothing. It did make me curious to seek out several films I'd not heard of before.

Erik says

A sad history of how short-sighted the movie companies of America, or that is, the leadership of those companies, were as they dealt with pressures from Germany to sanitize the activity of the Third Reich in motion pictures out of Hollywood during the 1930s. The story shows that the movie moguls ended up incorporating Nazi censorship onto American films (so that they would be able to play in the lucrative German film market) and that the compromises made were sometimes ridiculously easy (but not always). Though the book begins as straight history, the anger of the author seeps into the narrative and by the end the book is more of an accusation than just a history. Nonetheless, this sin against form isn't important. An easy to read tale of an aspect of Golden-age Hollywood that is ugly and nonsensical except if understood through the lens of greed.

victor harris says

A remarkable story about how the Hollywood studio owners accommodated German censors in the Reich

during the 1930s and even into the early phases of the war. Germany was a major market for American films and in order to sustain viability in that market, the owners (many of whom were Jewish) consented to rigorous overview of content by Reich censors. This included removing Jews from key roles or not acknowledging them in credits. Although there was exploration with some anti-fascist productions, those were squelched by the Germans.

Even when widespread abuse of German Jews such as Krystallnacht in 1938 was common knowledge, the owners continued to grovel and edit. Maintaining profit was at a premium and concern for human rights fell by the wayside. MGM added to this shameful chapter of corporate greed by knowingly working a scheme to help finance the German war machine.

On some occasions the Reich editing committee spent so much time sorting through films to eliminate Jewish staff and actors they neglected to notice the film itself. On other occasions, like most racist ideologues, the appetite for maintaining racially pure messages reached levels of absurdity. The censors weren't sure what to do with the film King Kong because an Aryan woman was in the clutches of a beast. They were overruled on that matter because Hitler liked the film. Mickey Mouse was in, Tarzan was out. And on it went until German domination of Western Europe made commercial transactions impractical.

PS 99 says

Hollywood is a business that makes money all over the world. In the 1930's Germany was a huge and valuable market for the major studios. A resurgent Germany started to make demands of Hollywood. These demands eventually included interference in the content of films and even whether a film should be made at all. It seems incredible that Hollywood not only acceded to the German demands but actively collaborated by nixing projects before the Germans could object.

It is an extraordinary story of appeasement in which the only people with an ounce of backbone were the Hays Office! At the height of the "collaboration" the Nazi consul in Los Angeles was constantly interfering with Hollywood scripts and projects. Some never got made and others were hacked about to remove any anti-Nazi material.

This little known part of Hollywood's history has also been tackled by Thomas Doherty in "Hollywood and Hitler". Urwand takes a more judgmental line than Doherty and firmly points to an active collaboration rather than an appeasement. He points out that the Studios "re-wrote" history and came out as smelling of roses.

His style of writing is very readable but is backed up by an immense amount of research especially at the German end.

Finally, I can recommend this interview with Urwand on ABC Radio
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/p...>

Robert LoCicero says

My second book on the subject of Hollywood's business dealings with Herr Hitler and Nazi Germany. And we all remember what a movie lover A. Hitler was. Hollywood kept him supplied with movies to watch during the 1930's prior to World War II. Jews and others were suffering under Nazi restrictions and violence

but Hollywood kept sending movies overseas. More review when I finish the volume. Should make for interesting Christmas reading.

This work is more detailed than the other recently read work on Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler. That volume presented its case for cooperation between Hitler and the Hollywood movie moguls through the exposition of trade papers and regular newspaper stories regarding this nefarious relationship. In this well-researched book the author uses cables and government and private corporate communications to show how the Hollywood power brokers used their influence to maintain a business relationship with the 3rd Reich while ignoring the worsening situation for Jews and Anti-Nazi elements in Germany. Their cooperation was in essence their effort to keep making money through the distribution of non-offensive (to the Nazis) movies to German movie theaters. It is a terrible episode in American history and author Urwand presents his case succinctly and convincingly. I highly recommend that one read this volume and consider the lives lost due to the actions of these men in conjunction with our government's inaction. Makes one wonder what these individuals were thinking.

Lisalou says

3 stars may be too much. This is a case of an interesting book but poorly organized. I wish the author had given more background about Jews in films before the rise of the Nazis as well as gone into more depth about how Jews viewed themselves in the US. Surely there is a better reason why the American Jewish Congress was encouraging film studios to not rock the boat other than worrying about the profits of the film studios in Germany. Paramount studios kept being mentioned mysteriously but without any explanation.

Also the details recounting of film scripts was rather tedious. One chapter describing how Hitler had used American films as propaganda would have been enough. And frankly most of the anti Nazi films described sounded rather dull and not very good.

The chapter on Ben Hecht was quite good and a whole book could have been made of that including some more details about US government's reluctance to help Jews in Europe even when they knew what was happening to them.

In the end, I think the reasons why film studios were willing to let Germany have a say in film content were more than just profits in Germany and probably had at least as much to do with the US government position on Naziism and as well as the policies of the American Jewish Congress.

Tim Jin says

I always learn something new when I read about Hitler, but Ben Urwand tries too hard in "The Collaboration." Hitler's links to Hollywood over one reel, (All Quiet on the Western Front) was a bit of a stretch for a book. The author just tries too hard on how Hitler had a strong hold on Hollywood.

After a while, I lost interest in the book because I couldn't connect the dots. It's an interesting subject, but not well explain. This book is poorly bounded with loose information. It lacks in structure.

The subject needs to be redone by an historian.

Stephen Goldenberg says

A fascinating account of the powerful influence Nazi Germany held over Hollywood in the 1930s. Hitler was an ardent viewer and big fan of Hollywood movies and he and Goerring understood very early on the propaganda power of commercial cinema. They passed a law banning any films considered anti-German (or, in effect, anti-fascist). As a result, the German consul in Los Angeles held tremendous influence over the Hollywood studios. He saw advance copies of scripts and prevented some key films being made. He was also able to get cuts made in other films the Nazis disapproved of and put pressure on studios not to use Jewish actors and technicians. He could do all this because Germany was such an important market for American films and the Nazis would not only ban an individual film they felt was 'anti-German' but all other films from that studio.

So, shockingly, the mainly Jewish studio heads went along with this to protect their revenues. But that wasn't the only reason. They also, as Jews, did not want to be seen to be using their movies to advance Jewish causes - they wanted to be seen as Americans rather than Jews. Furthermore, they were worried that, highlighting the Nazis' persecution of the Jews would encourage anti-semitism in the USA.

Even more shocking is that there was a reluctance after the war to have any mention of what happened to the Jews in Germany mentioned in films. The first reference to the Holocaust in Hollywood movies was in 1959. This book is, I feel, still relevant today as so many governments and businesses in democratic societies continue to trade (particularly in armaments) with fascist dictatorships.

J. Bryce says

A very good history of the American film industry in the 1930s as it dealt with the Nazi menace in Europe, but I didn't think the book succeeded in revealing any "shocking" collaboration between the Nazis and Hollywood, as the subtitle and introduction imply. (It was just Hollywood being Hollywood, protecting its interests by kowtowing to threats of nation-level boycotts. What industry WOULDNT do that?)

But as a recap of several interesting-sounding-but-little-seen movies, and telling the stories of how they were made (with significant alterations) or not made at all, it's fascinating and well done.

David says

It's interesting to watch the havoc that occur when one side has power and is willing to use it. The Germans updated their film laws so that they could threaten to ban all films from a Hollywood studio unless all copies worldwide of a particular movie were made so as to not offend German (Nazi) sensibilities. This explains some of the travesties committed to otherwise good books. This was an era where businesses strove to maintain a non-political stance, particular those selling to consumers so as not to alienate potential customers. It is sad to note that so much of Hollywood at the time was owner and/or run by Jews. The author also makes it clear that America knew more about the oppression of Jews in Europe. There is another theme which is not well explored, which was antisemitism in the West and in the US, in particular. There are a number of mentions of being unwilling to draw too much attention on themselves (Jews) because of a fear of a backlash. That's another sad chapter of that time period. It was an interesting contrast to reading about the war careers of some of the big names in Hollywood like Wyler, Houston, and Capra.

Martin says

There were times when I wanted to give this book one star because I thought it was poorly conceived and transparently executed. However, there is also a great deal of interesting information and it is well researched and contains quotations from studios' official correspondences. My first inkling that something was amiss was when the author stated how the information he found on Hollywood's collaboration with the Nazis was scattered around Los Angeles. Um, perhaps that's because there is no such thing as a singular film production entity called 'Hollywood'? The individual studios were/are indeed spread out across Los Angeles, and many of them donated their entire libraries to USC, UCLA or AMPAS, so I don't think there's any kind of conspiracy there.

Before I start getting too critical, I should list some fun facts I learned about the Nazis' taste in films. They loved "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer" because it depicted how a master race must hold lesser races in its thrall. They didn't like Lubitsch or Dietrich, seeing them as somewhat fallen Germans. They hated "Tarzan Finds His Mate" for finding humor in the possible suffering of animals (of the slapstick kind), and for positing that a jungle man would be a suitable partner. Goering loved "It Happened One Night" for its [Nationalist] socialist tendency, and for the recognition that moral action counts even when moral words are not present. He also loved "San Francisco" – and who wouldn't?

Okay, now I'm going to get critical, and if you are the author of this book, you should probably stop reading this review right now. The author goes into detail about several major films produced in the 1930s, but he shapes the information to suit his needs. Although "Gabriel Over the White House" can easily be read as making a case for fascism or Germany's National Socialism, it can also be read as reflecting anxiety over the power FDR was intending to yield, or paving the way for FDR to try to become a benevolent dictator. I do not believe it was the intention of the novelist (who had help Lloyd George set up Britain's welfare state) or the filmmakers (who were mostly liberal Democrats infatuated with FDR) to espouse totalitarian government. The film contains many gray areas and occasional conflicts between what was intended, what was reshot after Louis B. Mayer saw it, and how it was received by Americans and Germans. This author, however, does not take any of that into account. He presents the film's production strictly as a capitulation to German demands, which I find doubtful. Just because the Nazis loved something, it does not mean it was intended for them. Hitler LOVED Laurel & Hardy films, were they fascists as well?

The author does at least present a complicated and ironic picture of Darryl F. Zanuck's "The House of Rothschild", which was meant to be a maverick film with a positive view of Jewish people, produced by Zanuck's somewhat independent 20th Century (pre-merger with Fox). Zanuck was one of the few studio heads who was not Jewish, and the author posits that he was also less likely to cave in to the Nazis' demands. Unfortunately, the final product of "The House of Rothschild" traded in so many stereotypes, from devious money-grubbing to masterminding and dividing Europe to be under the Rothschilds' power, that it was easily used by the Nazis to make their case against the Jews.

I think the author makes tremendous missteps in his analysis of King Vidor's "Our Daily Bread" and Frank Capra's "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" by failing to take into consideration the careers and political leanings of their filmmakers. Just because the Nazis felt that these films supported a National Socialist agenda, it does not mean that the filmmakers sympathized with or capitulated to Germany! I feel like every time the author quotes a positive Nazi appraisal of one of these films, he is saying, "See! See! I told you that Hollywood collaborated with the Nazis!"

The author continually interprets the actions of individuals and studios (or studio heads) as those of a singular entity of 'Hollywood: the Collaborator'. Hollywood was not a singular entity, despite its monolithic presence in cinema history. There were directors and writers trying to make quality product, often battling or subverting studio chiefs who were trying to make popular product, and all of these studios were in competition with each other. Yes, there were some studios that wanted to play ball with the Nazis as well and as long as possible, but that often had to do with the product they already had being popular in Germany, which in MGM's case was greatly due to its European actresses MGM had chosen to make into its primary stars. Interestingly, MGM proposed to Paramount and 20th Century Fox (the only studios still doing business in Germany by 1936) that they collectively bow out of Germany together, but they declined MGM's proposal. Paramount then hired a Nazi to run their German operations. By 1936 these three studios had only a combined total of 8 films admitted to the German market, and the author states that they "needed 10 or 12 each just to break even." But what does 'break even' refer to? The cost of exporting pictures to Germany? Maintaining offices in Berlin? Subtitling or dubbing the pictures? And when the author states that the studios were blocked from removing any of their capital from Germany and therefore invested it in newsreel cameras and film to document the rising tide of Nazism, how does this come under the author's thesis of collaboration? Wouldn't that be considered subversion?

What troubles me is how the author selectively uses information, such as MGM's canceling production on an anti-fascism film, "It Can't Happen Here" which causes the author to conclude that "Hollywood remained at peace with Germany." He continually refers to decisions made by an individual studio to be the decisions made by a singular entity of 'Hollywood'! Never mind that by that point in time only three studios were still in business in Germany, and others such as Warner Bros. didn't care what Germany thought, and never altered its policy of making left-leaning 'ripped from the headlines' stories, which was why Germany stopped approving their films.

I nearly lost my mind when he discussed MGM's reshoots of "Three Comrades" which he writes, "would have been the first explicitly anti-Nazi film by an American studio. At this critical moment, when a major Hollywood production could have alerted the world to what was going on in Germany, the director did not have the final cut. The Nazis did." Uh...so, it was the responsibility of Hollywood narrative fiction to alert the world, and not journalists and politicians? Again, I'm not apologizing for the business practices of the studio heads, I'm only complaining about the shoddy manner in which this information is synthesized and lack of nuance in his analysis. (And by the way, not even a major director like Frank Borzage would get final cut in those days, that was the discretion of the studio heads and the Breen Office.)

The author's tone is so overreaching, and he takes into account very little that does not support his claim. He briefly explains what the Breen Office was and when it truly took effect, late 1934. However, he does not explain that around that time Jews were not the only people to disappear from the screens; homosexuals, unwed mothers, explicit communists, and ethnic minorities (other than domestics or banditos) also disappeared, in addition to many behaviors surrounding sexuality, drugs, religion, and protest. There was a whitewashing of Hollywood's depiction of America, a reactionary swing towards culturalism conservatism due to the disempowerment of the American male because of the Depression and exhaustion from the collapsed boundaries of Prohibition, and as a counterbalance to the political liberalism that was taking place under FDR. The author does not seem equipped to consider this, even though it was happening in conjunction with Hollywood's Nazi collaboration. And what of the streams of Jewish or anti-Nazi refugees Hollywood embraced – writers such as Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann, and directors such as the Jewish Max Ophuls and Billy Wilder, or Douglas Sirk (whose wife was Jewish) or Fritz Lang, who came to MGM after fleeing Germany the very night Goebbels offered him the control of the German film industry? And what about the many actors, composers and cinematographers who fled Germany or its occupied countries, and who found adequate employment in Hollywood films? This does not fit with the author's simplistic

agenda.

If we were to look at Hollywood's (particularly Disney and RKO) participation in FDR's 'Good Neighbor Policy', could we say that Hollywood (the singular entity) prevented the WWII from spreading to Central and South America? If we consider Paramount's support of the Shanghai film industry of the 1930's, when Chinese cinema tended to be quite leftist, can we say that Hollywood collaborated with the future Communist nation? And what of other industries which found ways to do business in Nazi Germany, such as the German Coca-Cola plant concocting Fanta out of ingredients available within Germany, rather than ingredients blocked by the trade embargo? There is so much that the author fails to consider, both in the Hollywood studio system and in business in general. Instead, he repeatedly says the same thing and expects it to be shocking, when in fact the information is not particularly revelatory.

It does come together in the end, thankfully, when the author explores the diluting of the message in "This Mortal Storm", particularly in its reticence to reference Hitler too often, and most especially downplaying Jewish identity. I completely agree with the author when he writes that MGM was "setting a dangerous precedent. They were proposing the idea that Hollywood should attack the Nazis without engaging in any special pleading on behalf of the Jews. They were abandoning the first half of their agreement with Nazi Germany, while leaving the second half intact." He then tells the story of writer/director/producer Ben Hecht's enlightenment and embrace of his Jewish identity at the beginning of the war, and how he eventually helped form the War Refugee Board, which pushed FDR into helping Jews out of Europe. The author then ends on a wry (and much appreciated!) note, stating that once Germans were able to see Hollywood films produced in the late 1930s and early 1940s, they did not have to be reminded of what had occurred under the Nazis because it had barely been mentioned. Great ending, even though the middle 70% had me tearing me hair out. And just to be clear, I do agree with the author's thesis, I simply believe that he can be misleading in how he presents, omits and interprets the studio system. If the author had kept the focus on the Breen Office's collaboration with Germany, that would have been much less reaching. If there were a single entity or power during the studio system, it was the Breen Office, and the author repeatedly mentions them. The author may not have had the film history background to recognize that this is where he should have focused.

Steve says

I've had a long time interest in the cultural life of Nazi Germany, including film. So, I was particularly interested in the Nazi reaction to American film of the 1930's. What I didn't know was how much the Hollywood studios took German boxoffice receipts into account when deciding what movies would be produced. Urwand concentrates on how the movies treated the Jewish persecutions (or rather didn't treat them) and tells of several movies which put the Third Reich in a bad light and were cancelled, so the Germans wouldn't retaliate against the studios. Even some that were made (e.g "Mortal Storm") avoided using the word "Jew" or "Jewish." Ironically, even some of the Jewish organizations in America approved of this policy. A small qualm: I didn't really care for the last chapter, which deals not with the movie industry, but with the struggle to get the USA to help rescue the European Jews. As important as this was, it didn't really fit with the rest of the book.

Billy says

There is some interesting research here, but the book falls short as both history and film history. Urwand

keeps trying to imagine what historical actors were thinking or feeling, which leads him to jump to conclusions and assume far too much. Urwand's descriptions of films are limited to the plot, with very little discussion of film style, he makes far too much of unmade film scripts, and he writes about films in the past tense, which is distracting and unnecessary. The overarching argument of the book -- that Hollywood "collaborated" with Nazi Germany -- is unconvincing and overstated, although a much more limited (and potentially more intriguing) case could certainly be made with the evidence presented.

Kaytlin says

Ben Urwand's writing is captivating. One of his greatest strengths is his ability to seamlessly provide context and background information for each of the Hollywood films he discusses, which allows the reader to feel as though they are watching clips of each the films. In other words, you do not have to be familiar with 1930s film to like this book. In fact, Urwand's passion for the topic, which is exhibited on each page, has motivated me to want to read more on this topic. The narrative is very easy to follow; it is almost impossible to get lost in the details because Urwand makes sure that you stay with him through his fluid text.
