In their books published in 2013, Thomas Doherty and Ben Urwand concur that the major Hollywood studios avoided direct criticism of Hitler and his anti-Semitic policies, abandoned scripts that would antagonize Germany, and eliminated Jewish characters in their films between 1934 and 1939. Urwand attributes Hollywood’s acquiescence to German pressure primarily to the Nazi consul Georg Gyssling, dispatched by Berlin to monitor the film industry, and to the studio owners’ fear of losing revenue from the German market. Although Doherty does not dispute that the studios capitulated to Germany’s demands to keep doing business there, he places as much blame on the inhibiting roles of the Production Code Administration (PCA), the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the United States government, and studio owners and Jewish organizations justifiably worried that blatantly anti-Nazi films would be construed as violations of American neutrality and as evidence for American anti-Semites, isolationists, and nativists that the Jewish movie moguls exploited their creations to promote an interventionist and pro-Jewish agenda.

The two scholars vehemently disagree over whether the self-censorship engaged in by Hollywood during this period constituted a formal policy of “collaboration” with the Nazi authorities, as Urwand claims, or a continuation of Hollywood’s standard practice of editing films and scripts to gain the approval of the PCA and local and state censorship boards in the United States and to placate domestic interest groups and foreign governments, as Doherty posits. Urwand categorically declares, “Over the course of the investigation,
one word kept reappearing in both the American and German records: ‘collaboration’ (Zusammenarbeit). And gradually it became clear that this word accurately described the particular arrangement between the Hollywood studios and the German government in the 1930s” (8). Urwand acknowledges that other American corporations did business with Nazi Germany throughout the 1930s, but deems the studios’ pursuit of profit uniquely reprehensible because they acted as “purveyors of ideas and culture,” who could have alerted the world to the danger that Hitler posed to Europe and its Jews (8–9).

Doherty objected to Urwand’s “slanderous and ahistorical” use of the term collaboration: “Collaboration is how you describe the Vichy government during the Nazi occupation of France or Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian double-crosser whose name became synonymous with treason. To call a Hollywood mogul a collaborator is to assert that he worked consciously and purposely, out of cowardice or greed, under the guidance of Nazi overlords” (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”). Moreover, he decried Urwand’s characterization of Hollywood’s interactions with Nazi Germany as a “pact” implying a moral equivalence to the notorious Munich and Molotov-Ribbentrop pacts. Instead, Doherty contended that the studio owners acted more like the democracies of Western Europe and the United States by appeasing Hitler, erroneously assuming that he would moderate his anti-Semitic and expansionist policies (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”).

The first test case for how the studios would adapt to Gyssling’s myopic vision of what cinematic fare was appropriate for German audiences involved Warner Brothers’ Captured! (1933). In June the studio invited him to preview the film and solicit his feedback. He demanded extensive changes in this film about the treatment of British POWs by their German captors during World War One. Despite Gyssling’s protest against the unflattering portrayal of the German guards, Warner Brothers released the movie in the United States without any cuts. Extrapolating from letters Gyssling wrote to other studios around the same time, Urwand presumes he threatened to revoke the studio’s license to distribute films in Germany if it did not comply with his demands. Instead, Warner Brothers turned to Frederick Herron, the head of the MPPDA’s foreign division, who resented Gyssling’s fanaticism and interference. Herron screened a reedited version of Captured!, but one that did not contain all the changes Gyssling had stipulated, to a more moderate German consul in New York who conditionally approved of it if minor revisions were made. Urwand speculates that Gyssling was so enraged by Warner Brothers’ circumventing his authority that he instigated the Propaganda Ministry to expel the studio
from Germany (55–58). Since Warner Brothers did redact *Captured!*, Urwand includes it among the studios which “collaborated” with the Nazis. Yet elsewhere he states that Gyssling “kicked Warner Brothers out of Germany for not making changes to *Captured!*” (178). Based on its handling of the film, Doherty, on the other hand, regards Warner Brothers as “the first of the majors to withdraw on principle” because it refused to accept Gyssling’s ultimatum (“Does ‘Collaboration’ Overstate”).

Nevertheless, the precedent of altering or discarding scripts that offended the Nazis rapidly became the standard approach of the other major studios to avert the loss of revenue from Germany. This was epitomized by the failed attempt to produce Herman Mankiewicz’s anti-Nazi script *The Mad Dog of Europe* (1933), which inveighed against Hitler’s persecution of German Jews. Both Doherty and Urwand enumerate several causes for the film industry’s passivity including its reluctance to jeopardize the German market for American films, the federal government’s commitment to foreign trade and neutrality, and the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL) circumspect preference that Gentiles and organizations not associated with Jews in the public’s mind carry the anti-Nazi banner. For Urwand, however, Gyssling’s threat to bar American films from Germany, even if one was overtly hostile to Hitler’s regime, constituted the “first and foremost” (68) factor in suppressing *The Mad Dog of Europe* and defining “the limits of American movies for the remainder of the decade” (75), even though he admits that “the evidence is inconclusive” (68) in this particular case.

While Urwand considers Will Hays of the MPPDA and Joseph Breen of the PCA the pawns of Gyssing in preventing *The Mad Dog of Europe* from being made, Doherty views them as the drivers of the policy. Frederick Beetson, the Secretary-Treasurer of the MPDDA, told Al Rosen, the feisty Hollywood agent determined to produce the first cinematic indictment of Nazi rule, that he should desist rather than endanger the German market for American films. After Rosen vainly sued the MPPDA for undermining his effort to film *The Mad Dog of Europe*, he submitted a proposal for it to the PCA. PCA chief Joseph Breen issued an “unofficial judgment” of Rosen’s proposal and similar ones that might follow. Therein he declared, “The purpose of the screen primarily is to entertain and not to propagandize.” He raised the specter that such films might provoke a pro-German and anti-Semitic backlash. The latter charge echoed the concerns of the ADL: “Because of the large number of Jews active in the motion picture industry in this country, the charge is certain to be made that the Jews, as a class, are behind an anti-Hitler picture and using the
entertainment screen for their own personal propaganda purposes.” Doherty reminds his readers that “around Hollywood, in dealing with the Breen office, an official prohibition and an ‘unofficial judgment’ was a distinction without a difference” (*Hollywood and Hitler* 58–59).

The other half of the studios’ pact with the Nazis, Urwand argues, was their voluntary removal of Jewish characters from their films. When Twentieth Century’s Darryl Zanuck announced his intent to make a movie about the origins of the Rothschild banking dynasty, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and its Los Angeles Jewish Community Committee (LAJCC) tried to dissuade him.³ Zanuck signed the esteemed British actor George Arliss to play the dual role of the family’s patriarch Mayer and his son Nathan to assure that *The House of Rothschild* (1934) would be a prestige picture. He felt the film drew obvious parallels between the ghettoization and persecution Jews endured in premodern Germany and their plight under Nazism. Two scenes featured ostensibly anti-Semitic caricatures. In the first Mayer hides his ledgers from a tax collector. In the second he summons his sons to his deathbed and instructs them to found branches in major European cities to guarantee that loans to the national governments there will not be stolen in transit. But Mayer excuses his subterfuge because the tax-collector extorts higher taxes from him as a Jew than from Gentiles and counsels his sons that their wealth will mean nothing until Jews achieve equality and respect. Furthermore, Nathan’s loan to England enables it to defeat Napoleon.

The ADL anticipated that the film would reinforce stereotypes of Jewish money-lenders, thereby fueling economic resentments against Jews during the Great Depression and Hitler’s first year in power. The organization asked Will Hays of the MPPDA to intercede with Zanuck who countered by sending positive feedback from an audience which attended a preview of *The House of Rothschild*, an endorsement from the National Council of Jewish Women, and a complimentary letter from the editor of the *B’nai B’rith Messenger*. The film garnered critical acclaim and box-office success. Many reviewers discerned the similarities between the precarious status of German Jews in the film and under Nazi rule; others appreciated how the Rothschild family triumphed over adversity. Nevertheless, the LAJCC formed a film committee comprised of its representatives and studio owners who agreed to be more prudent in their portrayals of Jewish characters. Appointed the head of the PCA in 1934, Joseph Breen translated the film committee’s recommendation into a practice of rejecting scripts with sympathetic and unsympathetic Jewish characters to preempt perceptions that Hollywood either championed Jewish causes...
or perpetuated anti-Semitic stereotypes. Parenthetically, the purge of Jewish characters was never complete, with twenty-four Hollywood films featuring them between 1934 and 1939 compared to sixty-three in the prior six years (Erens 428–33).

Urwand, however, condemns the Rothschild movie for containing “ideas so compatible with Nazi ideology that it was incorporated into the most extreme Nazi propaganda film of all time” (94), *The Eternal Jew* (1940). This infamous pseudo-documentary illustrated that even Hollywood did not conceal the deceitful machinations of the Rothschild bankers by inserting clips from the aforementioned scenes of Mayer. Of course, *The Eternal Jew* omitted Mayer’s mitigating explanations for his conduct. Urwand asserts that the depiction of Mayer was so noxious that *The Eternal Jew* was “unthinkable” without it (91–92). It never dawns on him how deeply engrained conspiracy theories about the Rothschilds and pernicious images of Jews were already rampant in Nazi ideology in particular and in Western culture in general.

Urwand also apparently neglected to consult Judith Doneson’s pioneering study of American Holocaust cinema and her more balanced assessment of *The House of Rothschild*. She highlighted the mixed messages imparted by the film. Surveys of American public opinion in the 1930s indicated that most Americans admired the business acumen and industriousness of Jews while disapproving of their clannishness, duplicity, and materialism. Doneson concluded, “In the earliest of these [anti-Nazi films], we find the European stereotype, distinctly Jewish, and a warning about the dangers inherent in political anti-Semitism” (54). Doherty, on the other hand, lauds the film as one of the handful of early “allegories by default on Nazi anti-Semitism” to be released in the United States and views it as “pro-Jewish” (*Hollywood and Hitler* 46, 47).

Urwand cites MGM’s cancellation of an adaptation of Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) as another egregious example of the studio’s deference to German censorship. The book envisioned how a fascist takeover of the United States could occur and how repressive it would be. MGM head Louis B. Mayer proceeded under the impression that the film’s American setting would not upset Germany, but ultimately heeded warnings from Breen and Hays to scrap the project. In lieu of any archival proof Urwand surmises that Breen and Hays were acutely aware that Gyssling would oppose a film on this topic and sought to preempt a confrontation over it with Nazi Germany (156–77). The whole episode begs the question why MGM would have expended so much money and time on a manifestly anti-fascist project if it had been party to a pact obligating it to prevent such endeavors from ever coming to fruition.
Doherty mentions *It Can't Happen Here* in conjunction with MGM's contemporaneous treatment of its production of Franz Werfel's popular novel about the Armenian genocide, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1933). Turkey threatened to boycott American films and persuaded its ally France to do so as well if MGM transformed the book into a film. In both cases the studio spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on screenwriters to draft and sanitize scripts to render them innocuous to the protesting countries, but to no avail, prompting Mayer to drop the projects. Doherty does not deny that Breen, Hayes, and Mayer put profits before principle, but he detects, as did *The Hollywood Reporter* at the time, that they were growing weary of the “‘Hitler fist’ pummeling the industry” as efforts to placate Berlin yielded diminishing returns (*Hollywood and Hitler* 209–10).

Warner Brothers emerged as the first studio to tackle anti-fascist and anti-racist themes in its films. In 1937 it produced *The Life of Emile Zola*. This biopic of the great French writer lionized him for defending Alfred Dreyfus from being unjustly convicted and imprisoned for stealing French military secrets on behalf of Germany. Urwand notes that Gyssling phoned an associate producer at the studio to express his government’s consternation over a film dealing with anti-Semitism and German militarism. He speculates that Gyssling’s call prompted Jack Warner to delete the few verbal references to Dreyfus’s Jewish background in the final script and retract the sole visual cue about it. While the dialogue about Dreyfus’s religious affiliation was cut, the image of a French general pointing to a registry entry identifying Dreyfus as a Jew was left in the film. Urwand is outraged that this brief visual “turned out to be one of the few explicit references to a Jew in American cinema for the remainder of the 1930s” (159–60).

Conversely, Doherty places *The Life of Emile Zola* within the context of Warner Brothers’ anti-Nazi activities, which encompassed its support of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (*Hollywood and Hitler* 313–14), broadcasting the League’s programs on the studio’s radio station KFWB (106–10), and releasing a series of “allegorical anti-Nazi feature films like *Black Legion* (1936) (against homegrown racist vigilantism), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) (against anti-Semitism), and *They Won't Forget* (1937) (against mob rule and lynch law)” (338). These movies dramatized infamous outbursts of anti-Semitism like the Dreyfus Affair, the lynching of Leo Frank, which served as the basis for *They Won't Forget*, and the recent murder trial of members of the natiivist Black Legion which terrorized African Americans, immigrants, Jews, and New Deal officials in Detroit. To be sure, Warner Brothers jettisoned the Jewish
origins of one of the League’s victims to evade PCA censure for violating both its prohibition of derogatory references to ethnic and religious groups and its minimization of Jewish characters and issues in Hollywood productions. Yet anybody who kept abreast of the headlines or recalled the events of the Dreyfus Affair and the Frank lynching either firsthand or from public commemorations held in the 1930s could recognize the anti-Semitism motivating the antagonists in these motion pictures and could perceive the similarities to Hitler’s anti-Jewish obsessions.

Following the formula it employed in Black Legion, Warner Brothers’ Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939) drew on revelations emanating from the 1938 trial of a German-American spy ring which procured American military secrets and passed them on to Berlin. The FBI agent in charge of a successful investigation and prosecution serialized the story and then published it as a book. Warner Brothers snapped up the film rights. Upon hearing of the project, Gyssling sent a letter to Breen to nip it in the bud. Warner Brothers refused and leaked the letter to the trade press to generate publicity for the forthcoming motion picture. Having lost patience with Gyssling’s relentless demands, Breen approved of the movie with the rationale: “The activities of this nation [Germany] and its citizenry, as set forth in this script, seem to be supported by the testimony at the trial and evidence adduced by the United States Attorney and federal operations” (Hollywood and Hitler 337). Cognizant of security threats posed by the German American Bund and other fascist groups in Los Angeles, Warner Brothers cloaked the shooting of the film in secrecy.

Confessions of a Nazi Spy fosters a semblance of documentary authenticity by intercutting commentary by an authoritative narrator with clips from newsreels. It castigates Nazi despotism and racism as fundamentally un-American, but veers away from explicitly naming Jewry as the force behind the international conspiracy Germany is combating. This narrative tactic not only hewed to PCA guidelines, but also allayed suspicions that the studio subliminally cultivated sympathy for Jews and communism. Only a year earlier, the House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities had convened hearings about Soviet infiltration of Hollywood.

While Confessions of a Nazi Spy strikes us as tepid and vague in retrospect, Doherty reminds us that when it was screened in American theatres in 1939, it was perceived as “a high profile provocation from a major studio: the Code seal and the Warner Bros. shield flashed a bright green light signaling that anti-Nazism, if based on credible evidence, was now a fit subject for Hollywood cinema” (Hollywood and Hitler 337). Even Urwand concedes that
the movie “pulled no punches, depicting all Nazis—whether spies or members of the German American Bund—as radical fanatics who took their orders directly from Berlin.” Nevertheless, he belittles it as “an obvious B-picture with exaggerated German characters, a cheesy narrator, and a simpleminded script” that failed to “broach important subjects such as the persecution of the Jews” (208). He seems oblivious to the probability that many viewers deciphered the euphemisms the Nazi agents use when they vilify their foe in terms their real counterparts reserved for Jews.

Doherty neither apologizes for Hollywood’s crass commercialism and political timidity in response to the threat Hitler posed to Europe and its Jews nor withholds praise from Warner Brothers, The March of Time newsreels, and the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League for exhibiting more courage and foresight in sounding the alarm about what was transpiring in Germany. While Urwand has discovered much new material on Gyssling’s mission to intimidate the studio owners, the MPDDA, and the PCA from making movies that would cast a positive light on Jews or a negative one on Nazi Germany, he falls prey to tunnel vision. He is so intent on demonstrating that the studios consciously collaborated with Germany that he stretches his evidence beyond what it actually substantiates and minimizes adherence to the PCA guidelines, Breen’s rigid application of them, the insecurities of Jewish organizations, and the federal government’s policies of maintaining business and diplomatic relations with Germany as other factors affecting Hollywood’s reluctance to withdraw from the German market by waging a cinematic war on Hitler. The accusatory and revelatory tone of Urwand’s book is scintillating, but, in the end, it produces a smokescreen and not a smoking gun.
Notes

1. This presentation summarizes a lengthier review article by the author, listed below under Works Cited. [Ed.]
2. Only Paramount, MGM, and Twentieth Century Fox, among the major Hollywood studios, retained operations in Germany throughout the 1930s.
3. Twentieth Century, which was formed in 1933, merged with Fox Films in 1935 to become Twentieth Century Fox.
4. These statistics are based on the filmography of Jewish movies compiled by Patricia Erens and count only films produced by the Big Five and Little Three Hollywood studios and film companies they acquired between 1928 and 1939.
Works Cited


The House of Rothschild. Directed by Alfred L. Werker, performances by George Arliss, Boris Karloff, and Loretta Young. 20th Century Pictures, 1934.


They Won’t Forget. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy [uncredited], performances by Claude Rains, Gloria Dickson, and Edward Norris. Warner Bros., 1937.
