Hitler. There is no need for a first name or a further point of reference. The name has become synonymous with evil. But that was not always the case. Americans today like to talk nostalgically about World War II as the “Good War,” a war where the forces of “good” and “evil” were easy to identify. Self-affirming films such as Saving Private Ryan (1998) and The Thin Red Line (1998) remind audiences of the horrors of that war, but, as they watch these images of the past flash across the silver screen, today’s movie goers never question the wisdom of American involvement in WWII. In the mid 1930s, however, the real horror for politically engaged citizens was how few people wanted to hear about the looming dangers of Nazism. Whatever we might wish to think today, during the 1930s the vast majority of Americans preferred to turn a blind eye to evil outside their borders; indeed, ninety-five percent of those polled in November, 1936, opposed U.S. participation in any European conflict (Gallup and Robinson 388).

There was one place, however, where Hitler and his allies were met with marked resistance: Hollywood. On December 9, 1938, two months after European leaders signed the infamous Munich Pact, allowing Hitler to annex part of Czechoslovakia,
fifty-six Hollywood stars, directors, writers and studio heads—including James Cagney, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Melvyn Douglas, and Jack and Harry Warner—met at Edward G. Robinson’s home and signed a “Declaration of Democratic Independence” that called upon Congress to boycott all German products until Adolf Hitler agreed to stop persecuting Jews and other minorities. Four months later, on April 9, 1939, Harry and Jack Warner premiered *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, the first American film to dramatize the Nazi threat to America.

It would be heartening to think that Americans were awakened by the daring pronouncements of their favorite stars. But that was not the case. While some applauded these actions, others accused anti-fascist movie figures of being ungrateful Jews and godless Communists. Several days after signing the “Declaration of Democratic Independence,” Edward G. Robinson was flooded with vitriolic letters reproaching him for joining “with the international Jewish faction to aid the Communists in destroying democracy and setting up a Soviet in the United States” (Stauder). The Warner brothers received equally vicious responses to the opening of their film. J. P. Thompson of St. Louis denounced *Confessions* as “gross Jewish propaganda” and told the brothers their movie “will have more people hating the Jew because a Jew produced it to show his hatred” (Thompson). Some people did more than just complain. Nazi sympathizers in Milwaukee burned down the local Warner Brothers’ theater shortly after the movie opened, while angry crowds in other cities picketed movie houses, slashed seats, and threatened exhibitors (Birdwell 76–77).

Film scholars often 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 Golden Age of Hollywood politics, the decade when movies and movie stars 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 by the Nazi sympathizers known as Brown Shirts and Silver Shirts at home. Likewise, a handful of politically engaged producers sought to reach millions of people by making anti-fascist films such as *Blockade* (1938), the aforementioned *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *The Great Dictator* (1940), and *Underground* (1941). Both groups quickly discovered that anti-fascist activities elicited anti-Semitic and anti-Communist reactions from fans, censors, and government officials. In the pre-World War II period, not everyone thought Hitler was such a bad guy. As late as January, 1939, the Production Code Administration (PCA), the movie industry’s self-censorship board, attempted to halt production of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, explaining that 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” (Lischka).

This article examines the politicization of Hollywood during the 1930s and the ways in which stars and producers fought fascism on and off the screen. It was during this era that the myth of “liberal” Hollywood was born—a myth, as we will see, that was
partially true and partially false. What stands today as a seeming example of democratic courage against Nazism and fascism was then seen by many government leaders as actions so dangerous that they prompted the Senate to launch an investigation of “Propaganda in the Motion Pictures” in September, 1941. And these “un-American activities” and activists did not go away in the post-War period. The repeated association of anti-fascist activities with Communism by anti-Communist and anti-Semitic politicians and citizens continued well after the war and would dampen liberal and radical Hollywood activism for decades to come.

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF HOLLYWOOD

From the opening of the first nickelodeon in 1905, motion pictures did more than simply entertain audiences. Political and civic leaders understood that movies were a new medium of political communication that bypassed traditional authorities and spoke directly to millions of Americans. Local elites realized that audiences were also voters, and they feared that movies might sway the minds of millions of citizens in ways they did not approve.

In the years before the coming of sound, it was the medium, not its stars, that had the greatest political impact on American life. Silent filmmakers addressed the most contentious political issues of the day—class conflict, child labor, women’s rights, birth control, rampant poverty, judicial corruption—and offered viewers solutions to social, political and economic ills. The inexpensive cost of making these early one or two-reel films allowed groups on the left, center, and right of the political spectrum—the American Federation of Labor, the Russell Sage Foundation, the National Association of Manufacturers, for example—to join more commercially oriented companies in producing films aimed at influencing mass opinion.1

Although organizations and individual filmmakers used movies to promote their ideological agendas, movie stars maintained a low political profile during these early years, in part because they were more focused on their careers than on their political commitments. Of course, there were some exceptions. A handful of actors, such as Viola Barry and Francis X. Conlan, openly proclaimed their socialist loyalties. Comedienne Mabel Norman did more than just talk. In the spring of 1913, she visited scores of nickelodeons in Los Angeles, campaigning for the Socialist ticket and speaking out on behalf of woman’s suffrage (Los Angeles Citizen, April 18, 1913; Normand 102).2 These exceptions aside, few actors said much about the specific political issues of the day.

The first systematic efforts to enlist stars for explicitly political purposes were made by the federal government during World War I. Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo understood the power movie stars held over the public imagination and reasoned that, if star power could be used to sell movie tickets, it could also be used to sell war bonds. Convinced that movie stars would “attract large audiences and arouse a great amount of enthusiasm and patriotism,” McAdoo called on the nation’s preeminent screen idols—Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and William S.
Steven J. Ross

Hart—to tour the nation hawking war bonds to movie-mad citizens (New York Exhibitors Herald, March 16, 1918). Prior to the war, explained Harry Crocker, Chaplin’s one-time assistant, “Hollywood stars had maintained a strict silence on the subject of religion, politics or civic subjects.” The stars 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.’” But selling Liberty Bonds, they decided, was an exception, “and that task they accomplished with gusto” (Crocker 15; ch. 14). Indeed, McAdoo’s expectations proved correct. The four screen idols were repeatedly mobbed by throngs of upwards of 100,000 movie-crazed people and sold as much as $1 million in war bonds in a single day. Such pronounced success would, ironically, heighten government fears in subsequent decades: if stars could sell Treasury bonds with such effectiveness, why not political ideas or causes?

During the 1920s, movie stars—especially those with theatrical ties—began to involve themselves in presidential campaigns. Al Jolson organized Broadway stars to work on behalf of Republican candidates Warren Harding in 1920 and Calvin Coolidge in 1924. In 1928, Claudette Colbert, Walter Huston, Frank Morgan, and a number of other stars, directors, and producers joined the Hoover-Curtis Theatrical League and campaigned for the Republican hopefuls. That same year, New York stage and screen stars Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, Helen Hayes, George Jessel, and Ed Wynn promoted the Democratic cause by organizing “Stars for [Al] Smith” (Cantor; Slayton). Yet, while celebrities happily endorsed their favorite candidates, few spoke out on controversial issues or involved themselves in political life in any substantial way. Most stars, observed screenwriter Anita Loos, were too busy trying to get their careers launched to pay much attention to politics. “It was every man for himself in those days, too” (Loos 36).

The increased participation of stars in political campaigns, however tangential, elicited worried reactions from conservatives who feared the potential uses of the new medium and its icons on behalf of left-wing causes. In 1922, three years after the Third International (a worldwide body of Communists) declared world revolution as its goal, R. M. Whitney, director of the conservative American Defense Society, reported that the “Communist party of America was quick to see the excellence of the stage and the screen as mediums through which Communist propaganda could be fed to the public without contravention of the laws.” Given access to FBI files of suspected Communist sympathizers such as Charlie Chaplin, Will Rogers, and Norma Talmadge, Whitney warned that many “prominent ‘movie favorites’, men and women, as well as stars of the legitimate stage are involved, knowingly or unknowingly, in this plan to sow the seed of Communism through entertainment for the public” (Whitney 141).

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. Los Angeles was not always a bastion of liberalism—certainly not in the years before FDR. As California’s one-time Attorney General Robert W.
Kenny remarked, “For all practical purposes, in the year 1930 there was no Democratic Party in California.” In 1931, there were four Democrats and thirty-six Republicans in the state Senate, and three Democrats and seventy-seven Republicans in the Assembly (Kenney 82). The appearance of a charismatic new President, who brought a dramatic flair to politics, proved especially important in inspiring previously complacent movie industry personnel. Roosevelt, explained Edward G. Robinson, made politics “no longer merely a politician’s ‘job’—he made it the concern of every human being . . . and in doing so he left the artist with no excuse to remain aloof from it” (Robinson).

As conditions at home and abroad worsened, movie stars began to question their responsibility as citizens to stand up for ideas they believed in and against forces they felt threatened democracy at home and abroad. And few issues raised as much concern as events in Nazi Germany and fascist Spain. Given the large numbers of Jewish movie industry personnel, 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. Of the 1,500 film professionals who fled Germany after 1933 and Austria after 1938, over one half settled in Hollywood—and told their stories of Hitler’s horrors to anyone who would listen. They reminded their industry colleagues of how the Nazi regime restricted the rights of Jews in 1933, barring them from employment, ownership of businesses, and enrollment in universities; how the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 officially classified Jews as an inferior race; and how the climate of hatred climaxed in 1938 with Kristallnacht—when Jewish businesses and synagogues were looted, vandalized and burned down by German mobs. Fears of anti-Semitic persecution were further compounded by the spread of fascism in Mussolini’s Italy and the outbreak of civil war in Franco’s Spain in 1936.4

The intersection of so many pressing issues, observed Leo Rosten, who spent nearly four years conducting a sociological study of the inner workings of Hollywood (1937–1940), soon led many stars to abandon the idea perpetuated by “managers, press agents and producers, that the actor or actress must remain a kind of a romantic, glamour idol or symbol, who never gets into the kinds of things which would lose him or her the esteem of the fans” or “alienate the Democrats or the Republicans” who went to the movies (Rosten, Oral History 46, 47). Movie stars who had previously shied away from the political spotlight—Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Gene Kelley, Katharine Hepburn—now entered the political arena.

Actor Melvyn Douglas, a Jew, recounted the process of politicization that he and his wife, actress and future Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas, underwent during a European visit in 1936:

I had come back from Europe in 1936, and had become very much aware of and concerned about what seemed to me to be the encroaching sympathy for the whole Hitler movement that I encountered in France and other places. On the boat on the way home, I sat at the Captain’s table and heard middlewestern business-
men talking about this very efficient guy that was running things in Germany, and how it was too damn bad that we didn’t have somebody like that in this country rather than that cripple in the White House, etc. etc. I was so shocked and so concerned by the whole experience—as was Mrs. Douglas when she came back later on from a singing trip in Europe—that we began to feel it was necessary for anyone who thought he sensed what was happening in Europe to talk about it, to do something about it if possible. (Douglas 24–25)

Not everyone in the world’s movie capital was frightened by the growing power of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. “There were people in Hollywood who supported their views,” explained Eddie Robinson. “‘Oh,’ the thoughts went, ‘Hitler will forget the anti-Semitism; it’s only a passing phase. And he will stop the spread of Communism.’” (Robinson with Spigelgass 162–63). A deeply concerned Paulette Goddard, Charlie Chaplin’s co-star in Modern Times, told one reporter in October, 1936, that many Hollywood figures were “falling easy victims to fascism” which was “fast outdistancing Communism in the film colony” (New York Times, Oct. 18, 1936). Indeed, one of the most outspoken conservative stars was “America’s Sweetheart,” Mary Pickford. A longtime admirer of Il Duce, Pickford cheerily noted in March 1934, “Italy has always produced great men and when she needed one most Mussolini was there. Viva Fascismo! Viva Il Duce!” Three years later, after touring Europe, she lavished equal praise on Adolf Hitler, remarking to one reporter that he “seems to be a very great fellow, too, for the German people. Things look much better over there” (New York Times, March 24, 1934; New York World Telegram, May 3, 1937).

In addition to combating nationwide isolationist sentiments, Hollywood activists found themselves battling fascists in their own backyard. Pro-Nazi groups such as the German-American Bund and the American Nationalist Party (ANP) joined with other local fascist organizations in stirring up anti-Semitic hatred and accusing Hollywood activists of being Communists. Calling on loyal “Christian Vigilantes” to boycott movie industry filth, one ANP poster proclaimed, “Hollywood is the Sodom and Gomorrrha [sic] where International Jewry controls Vice-Dope-Gambling—where young Gentile girls are raped by Jewish producers, directors, casting directors who go unpunished.” Anti-Semitic religious leaders, such as the fiery fundamentalist preacher Dr. Gerald B. Winrod, known as “the Kansas Hitler,” were invited by popular local figures like Aimee Semple McPherson to deliver sermons to local congregants (Los Angeles Times, Nov. 17, 1938).

While a few stars praised the leadership of Hitler and Mussolini, fears of fascism and Nazism led a far greater number of Hollywood liberals, Communists, and some conservative Republicans to fight on two fronts: some battled fascism off the screen, while others preferred to wage their battles directly on the screen. Those pursuing the former course organized a wide range of progressive Popular Front groups—among them, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the Motion Picture Artists Committee to Aid
Republican Spain, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee—dedicated to fighting fascism abroad and at home. “No other cause so gripped Hollywood during the 1930s,” observed one newspaper reporter (Brownstein 60).

Angelinos were exposed to anti-Nazi activities as early as February, 1934, when Samuel Untermyer, head of the New York-based Anti-Nazi League, came to speak about the dangers of Nazi Germany; a Los Angeles-based Anti-Nazi League was operating in the city by August, 1935 (Los Angeles Times, Feb. 21, 1934; Aug. 29, 1935). However, it was not until movie stars got involved in April 1936 (the same time that civil war was breaking out in Spain) that the organization, soon renamed the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League (HANL), began attracting mass attention. Far from being a dilettante celebrity group, the HANL marked the beginning of a new kind of issue-oriented politics that used the power of movie stars to raise public awareness about the dangers posed by Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. Led by actors and actresses such as Melvyn Douglas, Frederick March, Paul Muni, Sylvia Sidney, Eddie Cantor, and Gloria Stuart, the anti-fascist organization mounted frequent demonstrations and rallies, held talks on topics such as “Hitlerism in America,” sponsored two weekly radio shows that publicized fascist activities at home and abroad, published its own biweekly newspaper, called for boycotts of German and Japanese products, and blockaded meetings of the Los Angeles German-American Bund. Bolstered by its celebrity presence, HANL membership soon swelled to over 4,000 (Los Angeles Times, Jan. 7, 1937).

In addition to appealing to the general public, the HANL policed its own. When Vittorio Mussolini, Benito’s son, came to Hollywood to see his new business partner, producer Hal Roach, in September, 1937, HANL spokesman Donald Ogden Stewart denounced the visit on behalf of all “artists and writers” declaring that “Fascism means the suppression of all freedom of expression” (Los Angeles Examiner, Oct. 9, 1937; also see New York Times, Sept. 26, 1937). A similar protest was mounted a year later when Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler’s favorite filmmaker, came to tour the city’s studios. Taking out full page ads in trade publications, HANL activists declared, “There is no room in Hollywood for Leni Riefenstahl. In this moment when hundreds of thousands of our brethren await certain death, close your doors to all Nazi agents” (New York Times, Nov. 30, 1938). Indignant at such a hostile reception, both fascist figures cut their visits short.

It is important to underscore the emergence of politics as an important part of entertainment and social life in Hollywood—especially after the coming of sound prompted the influx of more intellectually and politically oriented Broadway actors and writers. Before Roosevelt’s election, explained director Elliot Nugent, Hollywood “wasn’t so political.” Dinner parties were filled with “artistic conversations” about “the difference between stage and screen” and discussions about “how much you missed New York” (Nugent 53). The anti-fascist campaigns of the mid-1930s politicized social life. The frequent meetings, dinner parties filled with debates over foreign policy, and anti-fascist marches before star-struck audiences provided actors and actresses with both a sense of purpose and social activity.
By January, 1938, Hollywood was thoroughly politicized. “There is hardly a tea party today,” Ella Winter wrote in the *New Republic*, “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” (Winter 276). Studio moguls grew so worried about the increased activism of their stars that they were considering inaugurating “a squelch campaign against anything savoring of political activities, even incorporating a clause in contracts covering this, like the famous morals clause” (*Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 24, 1937).

The fact that Hollywood’s actors, writers, directors, and producers were at the forefront of internationalist politics at a time when most Americans were still isolationists is hardly surprising given the city’s sizeable émigré community and that profitable foreign sales had long drawn industry-wide attention to events abroad. According to Leo Rosten, approximately twenty-nine percent of the industry’s directors, twenty-five percent of its actors, fourteen percent of its producers, and fourteen percent of its writers worked in Europe before coming to Hollywood (*Hollywood* 57). By the end of 1936, they and most Americans knew that fascist forces in Europe were on the move; Germany was reoccupying the Rhineland, Italy annexing Ethiopia, Spanish fascists fighting Republican forces, and Hitler and Mussolini formalizing their Axis alliance. Nevertheless, a poll that November reported ninety-five percent of Americans were opposed to United States participation in any potential war. Three years later, a Gallup poll found that forty-two percent of the public thought it more important to investigate American war propaganda than to investigate the spread of Nazism, fascism, or Communism in America (Gallup and Robinson, “Surveys, 1935–1938” 388; “Surveys, 1938–1939” 595).

Concern with international issues soon came to haunt Hollywood activists as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began its pattern of portraying anti-fascists as the allies of Communists bent on destroying America. Ironically, the initial impetus behind HUAC came from Representative Samuel Dickstein’s fear of Nazism, not Communism. In 1934, the Jewish Congressman from New York’s Lower East Side called for a House investigation of pro-Nazi propaganda and subversion in the United States. His insistence that the government “watch every subversive group in this country,” was endorsed by Texas Congressman Martin Dies, who wanted the committee to focus on the Red menace. When Congress approved the plan in 1938, they made Dies the chair and completely excluded the Jewish politician from HUAC. The Texan immediately launched an investigation of Hollywood, which he called a “hotbed of Communism,” but paid little attention to the Silver Shirts, German-American Bunds, or other fascists groups that many considered subversive.11

In August 1938, HUAC investigator Edward Sullivan turned the nation’s attention to the movie capital, when he accused the HANL of being a Communist front and its members of being the knowing or unknowing dupes of Red organizers in America.
Characterizing the accusations as a blatant effort to smear the organization, HANL chairman Donald Ogden Stewart argued that the committee should focus on the more immediate threat to democracy: fascism. HUAC investigators, he pointed out, had discovered “that the National Guard is being penetrated by the Nazi Bund and that there is an effective German spy ring operating in this country” (Los Angeles Times, Aug. 16, 1938). While the HANL certainly did have Communist members, such as director Herbert Biberman and writer Lester Cole, most of the group shared Edward G. Robinson’s attitude that he would join with anyone, “Stalinists, Quakers, Holy Rollers, D.A.R.’s, anarchists, or Republicans” willing “to fight against the black horror that was beginning to sweep Europe” (Robinson, All My Yesterdays 13, 146).

Not everyone shared Robinson’s Popular Front attitude. Those who feared the power of celebrity-politics continued to link anti-fascism with Communism, often in ways that carried strong anti-Semitic undertones. Hermann Schwinn, western director of the German-American Bund, was quick to defend Sullivan’s charges. Raising a cry that would be echoed years later by Joe McCarthy, Schwinn claimed to have in his possession “documentary evidence to substantiate charges . . . that the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League is co-cooperating closely with known Communists” (Los Angeles Times, Aug. 21, 1938). The HANL also came under attack from the anti-Communist Patriotic Sons of America who, at their annual convention in August, 1938, denounced all actors who lent their name to the anti-fascist cause (Los Angeles Examiner, Aug. 25, 1938).

Undaunted by efforts to intimidate them, fifty-six of Hollywood’s most prominent stars, directors, writers and studio heads gathered at HANL activist Eddie Robinson’s Beverly Hills home on December 9, 1938, to discuss the worsening situation in Germany and western Europe. Agreeing that something must be done, the Hollywood elite signed a petition, the “Declaration of Democratic Independence,” which they sent to the president and Congress, calling for a boycott of all German products until Hitler stopped persecuting Jews and other minorities.

Unfortunately for HANL activists, their efforts to persuade fellow citizens that anti-Nazism was distinct from Communism suffered a fatal blow when Hitler and Stalin signed their infamous non-aggression treaty on August 24, 1939. Liberals had been willing to unite with Communists so long as they stood in opposition to Hitler. But the day after the pact was signed, the HANL office was flooded with phone calls and telegrams from disillusioned members announcing their withdrawal from the organization—which quickly changed its name to the Hollywood League for Democratic Action (Friedrich 24, 47). The pact also succeeded in encouraging a new round of anti-Communist investigations of Hollywood. During a Grand Jury investigation in August, 1940, John Leech, a former Los Angeles County organizer for the Communist Party (CP), insisted that the HANL was conceived and organized by the CP for the purpose of playing upon the fears of Hollywood Jews and their sympathizers. We were “making suckers out of ninety-five percent of those who joined the organization” Leech boasted. These charges sparked yet another round of hearings by Dies’
HUAC later that month, and again a year later by California’s own un-American Activities committee headed by Jack Tenney (Los Angeles Times, Aug. 7, 1940).12

Underlying these accusations was the familiar anti-Semitic charge: Jews could not be good Americans because their loyalties lay with their religion rather than their nation.

THE AUDIENCE RESPONDS

Government officials were deeply concerned about the power of movies and movie stars to sway public opinion. What stars said, explained Leo Rosten, was “reported to the world in greater detail than any other single group in the world, with the possible exception of Washingtonists. . . . People would know Clark Gable or Greta Garbo in parts of the world where they didn’t know the name of their own prime minister or the mayor of their own little town” (Rosten, Oral History 1–2). But did Americans notice or care about the political opinions of their matinee idols? Did they have any impact on contemporary political thought? Apparently they did.

This new era of outspoken political involvement earned movie stars the admiration and the wrath of concerned Americans. In the weeks following the release of the December, 1938 call to boycott German goods, the signatories were barraged with scores of letters from fans who praised or disparaged their actions. Walter Loebl, a Roanoke, Virginia, attorney applauded their “stand regarding Nazi Germany,” and suggested that if “more popular, definitely non-Jewish, motion picture stars would speak from the screen to the audience, the audiences would be glad to sign the document as drawn up at your meeting” (Loebl).

The call to boycott Germany, however, prompted an even greater number of anti-Semitic letters denouncing the signatories and warning of future retributions. “News reports state that you have organized a crew of Jews to try to force the American Government to break diplomatic relations with Germany,” Chicago resident T. Conden wrote Robinson in December 1938. “Once it becomes apparent that you are attempting to supplant your role of stage villain and mendicant with an off-stage role of pseudo-statesman—every Christian in the country will recognize you for what you really are. A cheap, big-mouthed ignorant Jew lacking in a sense of public decency and decorum.” I. E. Schoening, a self-proclaimed “Bible Christian,” chastised Robinson for “entering upon a new field of endeavor—that of advising the President and Congress. What arrogance!” Apparently not knowing Robinson was Jewish, she added that the call for a boycott “was born in the minds of the men who own the movie industry—a group of clever atheistic Jews. They sit in the background and do the bossing while you godless gentiles do the fronting for them. . . . You set up a howl at what Hitler is doing, but now you are planning to starve innocent Germans. Pray tell me in what way you are better than he?” (Conden; Schoening).

Although many of these letters were written by people who wanted to vent their anger at the “Jew-dominated” industry, other correspondents—some anti-Semitic,
some not—were concerned that the group’s denunciation of Germany did not include a denunciation of the Soviet Union, which they believed posed an even greater threat to the United States. “You and your bunch are making it your business to boycott Germany,” J. O’Connor wrote from Cleveland. “But! Nary a word or statement against Russia and its persecution of Christians—oh, me!” Harwood Motley, an avid fan of Robinson’s radio show, Big Town, asked the performer if he condemned all the “Godless ‘isms’ of Europe” and pleaded with him to use his show to attack Communism as well as Nazism. Motley also included an article from a religious periodical, Our Sunday Visitor, that threatened “a boycott of the pictures” made by politically offensive stars (O’Connor; Motley).

Motley’s letter raised the worst fears of movie studio executives: that political activism by stars—especially Jewish stars—would alienate audiences and adversely affect box office receipts. Industry leaders had good reason to be concerned. Outraged by the stars’ call for a boycott of Germany, D. Shea, founder of the National Gentile League, announced that his organization, which he claimed represented over twelve million “True Blue Americans,” was declaring “a Nonattendance strike against yourself and others who take the same attitude against Gentiles as you do.” Likewise, the National Association of Southerners warned Robinson in December 1938 that his outspoken political activity was “far a field from your profession and can only cause your popularity to wane with millions of Americans who are unsympathetic to Jewish activities” (Shea; National Association of Southerners).

A number of studios quickly responded to the political actions of their stars. Anti-Nazi League leader Melvyn Douglas recounted how MGM executives, after receiving scores of similar letters, summoned him to their offices and “read me the riot act” and “politely asked me to desist from these activities.” Douglas refused to back down and suggested that the studio “tear up my contract” if they “felt that my activity was in any way harming their product.” The studio did not tear up his contract, but they did notify him that the German government refused to allow two of his Metro pictures to be shown “because of things that you have said about Hitler and the German regime” (Douglas 27, 28).

THE CINEMATIC WAR AGAINST FASCISM

The activities of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League reached thousands if not tens of thousands of citizens. But committed anti-fascists knew they had to reach millions if they were to politicize Americans and alter isolationist foreign policy. To that end, producers such as William Wanger and Harry and Jack Warner supplemented off-screen political activities with on screen activism. No studio, no 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” (New York American, August 11, 1936).

For the Warners, fighting fascism and anti-Semitism was a deeply personal com-
mitment. Harry and Jack, whose father fled deadly pogroms in Poland and immigrated to Baltimore in 1883, were determined to help European Jews who were being persecuted by Hitler and his Nazi thugs. Having spent a great deal of time in Europe setting up distribution networks, Harry was a far more astute judge of changing conditions in Germany than most studio heads. When Hitler declared an official boycott of Jewish business in April, 1933, and then demanded that Hollywood studios fire all German Jews, the Warners responded by closing their German offices in July, 1934, and refusing to conduct any business with the Nazi regime (Paramount, Fox, and MGM continued operating there until 1939). The brothers also announced plans to begin producing anti-Nazi films. As conditions in Germany continued to worsen, the Warners asked President Roosevelt to pressure European nations into keeping Palestine open for Jewish émigrés (H. Warner, Telegram).13

The Warners and other producers wishing to make anti-fascist films found themselves constrained by two factors: the considerable financial risks entailed by offending Hitler and the severe limitations imposed by the Production Code Administration. Not all studio heads, not even Jewish ones like Louis B. Mayer and Adolph Zukor, were as worried about Nazism as the Warners. The Jews may have created An Empire of Their Own, as Neal Gabler argues, but the author overestimates the moguls’ commitment to Judaism. When business interests clashed with Jewish interests, many studio heads—most notably Louis B. Mayer—favored the former. 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, Paramount chief Adolph Zukor told a reporter: “I don’t think that Hollywood should deal with anything but entertainment. The newsreels take care of current events. To make films of political significance is a mistake. When they go to a theater they want to forget. If it’s entertainment, it’s all right—but not propaganda.”14

Cooperation with Germany and Italy, or at least turning a blind eye to their policies, proved highly profitable. Throughout the 1930s, studios were heavily dependent on foreign markets for profits; some forty to fifty percent of industry revenues were generated from overseas distribution and exhibition. Hitler and Mussolini were highly conscious of the ways in which Hollywood was portraying their regimes and promised to retaliate against any studio that offended them. This threatened studios with a double loss: the loss of revenues from any anti-fascist film that was banned throughout the growing fascist empire, and even greater losses if all films produced by the offending studios were banned. There was even a third loss to consider: losing the pure profits that could be made by re-releasing old films on the European market.15

Jewish studio heads like William Fox and Louis B. Mayer felt it simply did not make sense to take such risks. As late as December, 1938, Fox was doing over 1.5 million marks worth of business with Germany, and MGM had hired Leni Riefenstahl’s good friend Ernest Jaeger to serve as their talent scout in Berlin (New York Times, Dec.
Politics

11, 1938). Columbia studio head Harry Cohn, a Jew, went a step further by making a documentary, *Mussolini Speaks* (1933), that hailed the achievements of its subject. *Il Duce* loved it so much that he invited Cohn to Rome to receive a medal. When the flattered mogul returned, he rebuilt his office to copy Mussolini’s and put a picture of the fascist dictator on his wall (Friedrich 47). On September 11, 1937, Hal Roach, not a Jew, and Vittorio Mussolini joined together to form Ram Productions. Denying any fascist leanings, Roach defended himself by saying, “I simply entered into a business deal,” and insisted that in no place other than Hollywood “was there criticism” of the deal (*Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 24, 1937).

Producers willing to risk financial losses in Europe in order to alert the nation to the dangers of fascism were nevertheless constrained from doing so by the Production Code Administration (PCA) and its anti-Semitic head, former journalist and Catholic layman Joseph I. Breen. A self-policing body organized by industry leaders in 1934 as a way to forestall federal censorship of motion pictures, the PCA regulated the content and subject matter of American film until its abolition in 1968. Under the leadership of Breen, the PCA set out to restore morality in Hollywood by controlling what audiences could and could not see on the screen. Eschewing the use of the screen for political purposes, the Code declared, “Theatrical motion pictures . . . are primarily to be regarded as *Entertainment*. “ The Code also stipulated that the “history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.”

Chances for making anti-fascist films were further blunted by Breen’s own prejudices. Brought to Hollywood by Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America head Will Hays, 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 percent . . . 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” (quoted in Carr 131). Worse yet, Breen accused Hollywood activists of trying “to capture the screen of the United States for Communist propaganda purposes” and suggesting that “most of the agitators are Jews” (Breen to Robert Lord, Dec. 5, 1937, quoted in Vaughn 44).

Breen did all he could to prevent the making of any film with openly sympathetic references to Jews. Although independent producers turned out two low-budget anti-Nazi films before PCA regulations took hold, *Are We Civilized* (1934) and *Hitler’s Reign of Terror* (1934), Hays and Breen succeeded in halting subsequent studio efforts to produce *The Mad Dog of Europe*, a stark denunciation of Hitler’s regime. In a 1936 memo to RKO producer Sol Lesser, Breen insisted that Jews “as a class, are behind an anti-Hitler picture and using the entertainment screen for their own personal propaganda purposes.” He warned Lesser that there was “strong pro-German and anti-Semitic feeling in this country” and that the inflammatory film “might result in a boomerang.” The movie was not made. Breen also managed to kill MGM’s efforts to bring Sinclair Lewis’ stark anti-fascist novel, *It Can’t Happen Here*, to the screen (Breen
Initially thwarted by Breen and Hays, politically driven producers circumvented Code restrictions by making three different types of films: obliquely anti-fascist movies based on real events, movies that exposed audiences to the historical contributions made by Jews, and movies that highlighted past incidents of injustice against Jews. In the first instance, Warners’ 1937 production *Black Legion* told the true story of a domestic fascist organization that wrought murder and terror throughout the Midwest during the early 1930s. Likewise, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) was a lightly veiled anti-fascist film that celebrated Robin Hood’s resistance to the authoritarian rule of King John. Biographical productions that heralded the varied contributions Jews had made to western civilization included films such as *The House of Rothschild* (1934), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), a re-released version of *Disraeli* (1929), and *Dr. Erlich's Magic Bullet* (1940). Finally, films such as *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.

Anti-fascist producers proved less successful in dramatizing the Spanish Civil War. Paramount’s *Last Train From Madrid* (1937) focused on the drama of the war without any reference to its political struggles. A year later, independent producer William Wanger tried to make an explicitly pro-Loyalist film about the starving residents of a Spanish small town who were surrounded by Franco’s troops and whose only hope of survival depended on the arrival of a Russian supply ship. The PCA approved the film only after forcing Wanger to eliminate most of its politics. The version of *Blockade* that opened in April, 1938, was turned into a love/adventure story with only the slightest hint of a pro-Loyalist message. Even so, *Blockade* was condemned and picketed by Catholic groups around the nation—actions which led to its cancellation in several states. The film’s hostile reception sent a clear warning to bottom-line-conscious studio executives.

After several years of trying to get around censors, the Warner brothers finally found an opportunity to make an explicitly anti-Nazi film. On February 26, 1938, FBI head J. Edgar Hoover announced that his agents had uncovered a Nazi spy ring operating in the United States. Unfortunately, the publicity-seeking Hoover’s remarks came before all the spies had been arrested, thus allowing several to escape back to Germany. In October, 1938, eighteen individuals charged with violating U.S. espionage laws were put on trial in New York; a month later, the jury found them guilty.

Seizing on this golden opportunity, Harry and Jack bought the rights to the story from Leon G. Turrou, the “G-man” who broke the case, and brought him to Los Angeles to work as a technical consultant. Turrou, who had little respect for Hollywood prior to his visit, was impressed by the film community’s political awareness. The stars and executives he met “seemed infinitely more cognizant than anybody in the East of the intentions of all ‘isms’, Bunds, and so-called ‘America for Americans’ societies. They really know and appreciate the problems that this country faces in this subversive activity,
which is more than I can say for many other responsible citizens throughout the coun-
try.” Most importantly, he added, “I found Hollywood more than ready to do something
about it” (Turner 6).

Although based on a true story, Confessions of a Nazi Spy encountered heated
opposition from people who tried to stop the film from being made. Dr. George
Gyssling, German Consul General in Los Angeles, quickly called on PCA head Joseph
Breen and demanded that production be halted. Gyssling threatened that the Reich
would ban all subsequent productions that featured any actors who appeared in
Confessions (Gyssling to Breen, Nov. 23, Dec. 6, 1939; Los Angeles Examiner, June 6, 1939).
Rival studio leaders also voiced their displeasure, fearing that the Warners’ anti-fascist
campaign would lead the German government to retaliate by banning all American
films—thereby costing them millions in revenue. “So far as we are concerned,”
Paramount Pictures executive Luigi Luraschi wrote Breen in December 1938, “our poli-
cy at the moment is that we will not attempt to make any picture that will be obviously
uncomplimentary to any nation abroad.” Downplaying Paramount’s economic motives,
Luraschi warned that if Warners made the film, they “will have on their hands the blood
of a great many Jews in Germany” (Luraschi to Breen, December 10, 1938).

PCA censors were equally opposed to the film and repeatedly warned that
Confessions would cost the studio money and do irreparable harm to the film industry.
As one PCA official wrote 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?” Although the Nazi spies had recently been
convicted, the PCA nevertheless concluded that the “inference that the German gov-
ernment is directly sponsoring agitation in the United States, with the intent of
seizing control of the country, constitutes an extremely grave accusation, which lacks
proof as far as public information goes” (Lischka).

The Warner brothers discovered that there were many others who did not want to
see Hitler and Nazism portrayed in a negative light. The studio received so many threat-
ening letters after announcing production plans that they 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 the Nazis against relatives in Germany.

The Warners refused to give in to outside pressure. “We produced the ‘Nazi Spy’
picture because we believed first that it would supply dramatic entertainment,” Jack
explained, “and second, because we felt it exposed conditions concerning which every
American and every free man everywhere should be informed” (J. Warner, Correspondence). When told by one studio owner that making anti-Nazi 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
Steven J. Ross

in exchange from some crummy film royalties out of Germany?” (Warner quoted in Friedrich 50). The goal of films like Confessions, Harry chimed in, was to “drive out the Bunds, the leagues, the Black Legions, Silver Shirts, Black Shirts, Dirty Shirts” (Jewish Telegraphic Agency Features, Dec. 23, 1938).

After finally receiving approval from a reluctant Breen, the Warners premiered the controversial film in Beverly Hills on April 27, 1939. The film generated so much concern within industry business circles that 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” (Film Weekly, May 27, 1939). Fearing German box-office retribution against any of his stars seen at the premier, Louis B. Mayer threw a “surprise” birthday party for Lionel Barrymore on opening night and ordered all MGM luminaries to appear at the gala (Film Weekly, May 27, 1939). Despite the hesitancy of studio heads, the opening night audience “broke into frequent expressions of its emotions, and at the close applauded with unusual and sustained enthusiasm” (Hollywood Reporter, April 28, 1939). The film’s anti-fascist politics were widely praised by film critics. “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” (Hollywood Spectator, May 13, 1939).

The Warners succeeded in reaching beyond the physical confines of Hollywood and bringing their anti-fascist message to people throughout the nation and the world. An editorial in the Indiana newspaper, 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” (South Bend Tribune, May 14, 1939). Critics in London, Toronto, Jerusalem, and Durban were 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 ([England] Film Weekly, June 24, 1939). The studio was also flooded with impassioned letters from viewers, over 550 according to Harry Warner. Sylvia Wilcox Razey, Executive Secretary of the Descendants of the American Revolution, praised the brothers’ “courage in producing such a picture in the face of Nazi pressure and intimidation” and hoped that it would “arouse public opinion against Nazi agents and their followers in this country . . . who are, undoubtedly, the foremost menace to our liberties and democratic institutions” (Razey).22

The brothers’ anti-fascist efforts also elicited vituperative reactions from moviegoers who blasted the film and its producers for pursuing narrow Jewish interests that endangered national security. As one Riverside, California resident wrote Jack Warner, “Most motion picture executives have favored only the ‘reds’, is it because most of them are Jewish and they hate Hitler or are they in favor of atheism? . . . America’s
place is at home. We have enough to do to put our own house in order and stay out of other people’s troubles and their countries.” A Somerville, Massachusetts viewer wanted to know when the brothers were going to “put out a picture showing the horrifying menace of a Communist regime that slaughters millions and millions of souls (Please don’t say Communism doesn’t do that!). We have seen ‘Confessions of a Nazi Spy’. Let us now see ‘Confessions of a Communist Spy’ or the ‘Red Menace Exposed’, or ‘Red Moscow and Satanic Utopia’” (Haesle; De Angelis).

Audience response may have been mixed, but the reaction of industry watchdogs was not. Fearing the disastrous financial impact anti-fascist films might have on the European market, following the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939, movie industry czar Will Hays forbade American studios that wished to receive a PCA seal from developing any films with an obvious anti-Nazi bias—a ban that remained in effect from September 15, 1939, to January 1940. The PCA edict slowed down but did not halt the most determined producers. Warner Brothers quickly turned out 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. The movie 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.

Once the PCA ban was lifted in January, 1940, several other studios produced films critical of Nazi Germany and American isolationism. Fox studios released Four Sons (1940) and I Married a Nazi (1940), while Charlie Chaplin premiered The Great Dictator (1940). Louis B. Mayer continued to play both sides of the political fence. “M-G-M kept on releasing films in Nazi Germany until Hitler finally threw them out,” remarked a disgusted Joseph Mankiewicz, himself an MGM producer. “Warner Brothers had guts. They hated the Nazis more than they cared for German grosses” (Mankiewicz quoted in Friedrich 49). As late as June, 1939, Mayer was still trying to curry favor (and business) with the German government by hosting a group of ten Nazi newspaper editors on the MGM lot, including Carl Cranz, editor of Hitler’s Völkischer Beobachter (People’s Observer)—which initiated the anti-Semitic attacks on Hollywood. “I couldn’t believe it,” Harry Warner wrote to MGM executive Sam Katz. Harry refused to contact Louis directly because he considered it "a waste of time" (H. Warner to Katz, June 27, 1939). Once war actually broke out, Mayer tried to mollify his critics by producing three anti-fascist films in 1940, The Mortal Storm, Flight Command, and Escape.

Even after the outbreak of war in Europe, anti-fascist filmmakers continued to encounter opposition from fans and industry officials alike. As Nazi troops marched across Europe, Charlie Chaplin, the world’s most famous comedian, decided to break his silence, literally and figuratively, by working on a film that mocked Hitler and Mussolini, a film in which he planned to add a speaking conclusion. “I’m no Communist,” Chaplin
told his assistant Harry Crocker, “just a human being who wants to see in this country a real democracy, and to see freedom from this internal regimentation which is crawling over the rest of the world” (Crocker 18; ch. 15). Chaplin began shooting The Great Dictator in September, 1939, and premiered it in October, 1940.

Like other Hollywood activists, Chaplin quickly learned what happened when stars spoke out on controversial political issues. Just the rumor of an explicitly anti-Nazi film generated calls for punishment from disgruntled moviegoers. In February, 1939, Walter W. McKenna of Ventnor City, N.J., wrote to influential Foreign Relations Committee member Senator Robert R. Reynolds, demanding that “official cognizance should be taken of the motives of one, Charles Chaplin, an alien resident of the State of California” who now intended to produce a film “designed to ridicule and antagonize certain totalitarian governments of Europe” (McKenna ). Other disgruntled fans accused Chaplin of being a Communist because he attacked Hitler and Mussolini but not Stalin. Chaplin also antagonized Hollywood’s anti-Semitic critics when he told a Seattle Jewish Transcript reporter, “I did this picture for the Jews of the world. I did it because I want to see a return of decency and kindness and humanity” ([Seattle] Jewish Transcript, December 20, 1940).

THE PRICE OF ACTIVISM
As one looks back on the heated controversies of the late 1930s and early 1940s, it would be comforting to think that by 1941 the vast bulk of Americans understood the dangers that fascism posed to democracy and the important role that movie-activists played in drawing the nation’s attention to such threats. “It will be to Hollywood’s credit,” Leo Rosten predicted in August, 1941, “that its anti-Fascist activities predated the swing in American public opinion and diplomacy. It will be to Hollywood’s credit that it fought the Silver Shirts, the German-American Bund, and the revived Ku Klux Klan at a time when few citizens realized their ultimate menace” (Rosten, Hollywood 154). He was wrong! Americans did not applaud Hollywood or immediately rise up to proclaim the need to protect world-wide democracy. Isolationism, not interventionism, was the dominant mood of the times; what happened in Europe was none of our business. As late as July, 1941, a Gallup poll reported seventy-nine percent of the respondents opposed the U.S. entering war against Germany and Italy (Snow 69).

By downplaying the threat of fascism and emphasizing “Jewish” Hollywood’s reluctance to attack Communism, anti-Communist and often anti-Semitic politicians and movie fans of the prewar era helped lay the ideological groundwork for the postwar Red Scare and HUAC investigation of Hollywood. What the Warners and activist producers viewed as actions in defense of our country, others saw as part of a media conspiracy, led by Jews, aimed at forcing America into war. An opinion poll commissioned by the American Jewish Committee in April, 1940, found that a plurality of Americans believed that Jews held too much power and influence in the United States (Carr 238).

In September, 1941, isolationist Senators Gerald Nye of North Dakota and
Bennett Clark of Missouri, citing the recent spate of Hollywood films that they insisted were vicious un-American propaganda intended to sway public opinion toward American intervention, succeeded in launching a formal Senate “Investigation on Propaganda in Motion Pictures.” In a radio address given at a pro-isolationist “America First” rally on the eve of the hearings, Senator Nye accused Hollywood of producing films “designed to rouse us to a state of war hysteria.” Reading aloud the names of studio heads—Cohen, Mayer, Zukor, Schenck, Warner—while the audience reportedly chanted “the Jews,” Nye denounced Hollywood as a “mighty engine of [pro-war] propaganda” whose power lay “in the hands of men who are naturally susceptible” to “national and racial emotions.” He accused the moguls of exerting undue influence on President Roosevelt and pressuring him to make foreign policy decisions that were not in the nation’s best interests (Nye quoted in Carr 241, 243).

Senator Clark opened the hearings on September 9 by accusing the motion picture industry of glorifying “England’s imperialism” and creating “hatred of the people of Germany.” Sounding a now familiar refrain, he asked, “Does anyone see a pictorial representation of life in Russia under ‘Bloody Joe’ Stalin? They do not” (U.S. Congress 71). Nye joined in the vilification campaign by calling Hollywood the “most potent and dangerous Fifth Column in our country” and identified twenty-five American films that he considered pro-war propaganda (Nye quoted in Birdwell 155). During the course of the hearings, Nye admitted that he had seen only two of the films he identified as propaganda. This was two more than Clark, who admitted he had seen only one film in the past six years. Insisting that he and the committee were driven by patriotism and not prejudice, Nye proclaimed, “If anti-Semitism exists in America, the Jews have themselves to blame” (Variety, Sept. 10, 1941).

The Senate hearings quickly came under widespread attack from the press and national leaders, who accused Nye of fostering religious hatred. Former Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, hired by the moguls to represent them at the hearings, blasted Nye for dividing the “American people in discordant racial and religious groups in order to disunite them over foreign policy” (Motion Picture Herald, Sept. 13, 1941). He defended Jewish concerns with Nazism as American concerns with national security and democracy. Hollywood personnel were acting in the service of the nation—helping FDR, amusing citizens, and promoting patriotism. Studio executives joined Wilkie in insisting that the American people, not the Senate, should decide what constituted propaganda. The Senate committee responded to these multiple attacks by abruptly recessing their hearings at the end of September, postponing them indefinitely in mid-October, and canceling them in December after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

But the damage had been done. The hearings had succeeded in once again conflating Hollywood and anti-fascism with Communism, internationalism, and Jewish interests. America’s entry into World War II and the movie industry’s enthusiastic participation in the war effort led many fans and politicians to suspend their suspicions of Hollywood’s “true” loyalties. However, soon after the war’s end, a rabidly anti-
Communist Congress quickly forgot Hollywood’s vital contribution to the “Good War” and launched another round of HUAC hearings that linked prewar anti-fascist activities with Jewish self-interest and Communist efforts to undermine American democracy. The men who led the Red Scare conveniently forgot that pre-war anti-fascists had allied with Communists because the latter were the most vocal and well organized opponents of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. Although producers 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 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.26

The politicization of Hollywood during the 1930s set precedents and provided lessons that have lasted into the next century. The first, and perhaps most important, was the emergence of “liberal” Hollywood. Like any myth, the “myth of liberal Hollywood” contained elements of truth. Individual actors, writers, directors, and producers were in the vanguard of liberal and radical activities in the 1930s and early 1940s. However, the studios that constituted the core of the movie industry (with the exception of Warner Brothers) and determined what movies the public would or would not see had repeatedly proven themselves political conservatives who were unwilling to risk profits to promote liberal causes. Nevertheless, it was the stars’ politics, not that of their employers, that made “Hollywood” synonymous with the “liberal media”—an association that was fixed in the popular imagination by years of highly publicized anti-Communist investigations undertaken by various Congressional and state committees. Activists who attacked Hitler without simultaneously attacking Stalin were vilified by conservative critics as Communists, Communist dupes, or, at best, naïve liberal dupes. By the early 1950s, “liberal Hollywood” was seen by many citizens as a danger to American security—a sin many liberals paid for by being blacklisted.

The persecution of Hollywood activists after the war provided an important warning: Americans did not want their fantasies punctured by screen idols who took controversial political stands. As the often prescient Leo Rosten observed in 1941, “It is not surprising that when Hollywood became articulate about war, unions, Fascism, boycotts, or the New Deal, a murmur of anguish rose in the land. . . . When a Joan Crawford denounced the invasion of Ethiopia, when a Frederic March pleaded for ambulances for Spain, it was like harsh voices destroying a cherished dream” (Rosten, Hollywood 134). Star activism proved especially problematic for actors or actresses who took stands on controversial foreign issues that were well in advance of public opinion and government policy. Charlie Chaplin found his career effectively ended after making what his enemies judged as pro-Communist remarks in 1942.27 Over the next several decades, liberal and left-leaning stars who spoke out on foreign affairs—from nuclear disarmament in the 1950s to the Viet Nam war in the 1960s to the most recent
Iraq war in 2003—opened themselves up to Red baiting and faced a public wrath that was not leveled at stars who took conservative stands in line with official government policy. When actor and longtime activist David Clennon went on Sean Hannity’s radio talk show in February, 2003 and likened the current “moral climate” of American foreign policy to Nazi Germany under Hitler, the VOTE.com website set up a poll asking whether Clennon should be fired from his job on CBS’s *The Agency*.28

The successful efforts of right-wing proponents before and after World War II to link Hollywood activism with Communism sent a signal to subsequent generations of movie stars: going public with even modest liberal politics was likely to endanger if not ruin a career. During the 1950s, Hollywood conservatives such as George Murphy and Ronald Reagan grew increasingly out-spoken in denouncing what they repeatedly referred to as the Communist menace. At the same time, as blacklisting ended the careers of scores of actors, directors, and producers who had been politically active before the war, many if not most of Hollywood’s liberals and leftists, fearing for their own careers, chose to retreat from the political arena and remain quiet. The Hollywood left would not remerge until the 1960s, when opposition to racial discrimination—a domestic issue that could not easily be Red-baited—prompted a new era in the politicization of Hollywood.29

---

**Notes**

1 The early uses of film for political ends are discussed in Sloan; Brownlow; Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*; and Shull.

2 I am grateful to Rob King for bringing this material to my attention.

3 For descriptions of the uses of celebrities during World War I, see Mary Pickford Scrapbooks (vols. 30–31); Maland; and Campbell. The best overview of the evolving relationship between movie stars and politics is unquestionably Brownstein.

4 For portraits of the émigré community in Hollywood, see Taylor; and Giovacchini.

5 For further information on Pickford’s politics in the 1920s and 1930s, see Pickford Scrapbook, vol. X; and Whitfield.

6 See photo of flyer in Carr 112. For pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic efforts in Los Angeles and throughout the nation, see Whitfield; Gabler; Brinkley; and Carr.

7 Anti-Nazi League members included conservatives such as Rupert Hughes and Morrie Ryskind. The Popular Front was a common term used in the 1930s to describe the broad coalition of left and liberal groups—often led by members of the Communist party—who joined together to oppose fascism abroad and to promote a progressive political agenda at home.

8 League activities were regularly reported in the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. The best overviews of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League can be found in Cogley 35–40; Giovacchini 72–107; Birdwell; Carr; and Brownstein.
9 For a first-hand description of Broadway activism see Maltz.
10 The activities of these and other Popular Front organizations are discussed in Ceplair and Englund; Denning; Rosten, *Hollywood,* and Brownstein.
11 Dickstein and Dies are quoted, respectively, in Friedrich 52n, 52.
12 For subsequent hearings in Washington and California, see Ceplair and Englund.
13 Hitler’s prohibitions against Jews in the German film industry—and American reactions—are discussed in Doherty 93–102. The best overviews of Warner Brothers involvement in fighting fascism are Kaplan and Blakley; Roddick; Warner with Jennings; Birdwell; and Gabler.
14 Thalberg and Zukor quoted in Gabler 338, 340.
15 The importance of foreign revenues is discussed in Koppes and Black; Rosten, *Hollywood* 160–61.
16 The Code guidelines are quoted in Doherty 347, 364. An industry wide Production Code was first adopted on March 31, 1930, but largely ignored until July 1, 1934, when an expanded Code was rigorously enforced by the newly created Production Code Administration. A complete version of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 and the 1934 Addenda can be found in ibid., 347–67.
17 For a discussion of the three aforementioned anti-Nazi films, see Doherty 98–102; *New York Times,* April 22, 30, May 1, Dec. 30, 1934; *Los Angeles Times,* June 3, 1934.
18 Leo Braudy has referred to these as “‘displaced’ political films, guised in a mixture of fiction and history, anchored in a particular time and place but speaking to the present” (Braudy 30).
19 For a discussion of *Blockade* and its reception, see Bernstein; Booker, 65–66; Koppes and Black, 24, 25.
20 For an analysis of the making of and reactions to the resulting film, see Ross, “*Confessions,*” 48–59.
21 One especially frightening letter sent to Jack Warner’s wife Ann, just prior to opening night, contained a detailed floor plan of their Beverly Hills home (Shindler 209).
22 For foreign reaction to the film, see Ross, “*Confessions*” 55–57.
23 As Joseph Breen predicted, *Confessions* was banned everywhere the Nazis could exert pressure. The PCA ban on anti-Nazi films is discussed in Birdwell 78.
24 The film was granted official PCA approval on August 30, 1939. It was banned in Norway, Sweden, Dutch East Indies, Egypt, and Shanghai (PCA Files, *Espionage Agent*).
25 For a fuller discussion of the Senate investigation, see Moser 731–51; Carr 238–77; and Birdwell 154–71.
26 For Jack Warner’s testimony, see Birdwell 174–75; for Robinson’s fall from grace, see Robinson and Spigelgass.
27 For a discussion of Chaplin’s politics and decline, see Maland.
28 On February 7, 2003, 14,471 respondents (63%) had voted Yes to firing Clennon and 8,658 (37%) voted No. When the poll closed on March 6, 2003, the final totals had changed: 27,723 votes Yes (48%) and 29,623 (52%) voted No. See www.vote.com/vote/60025734/index.phtml?cat=4075633.
For an overview of Hollywood politics from the 1930 to the 1960 see Ceplair and Englund. The activities of movie stars on the left and right are the subject of my current project, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics*.
Works Cited


Crocker, Harry. “Charlie Chaplin: Man and Mime.” Unpublished manuscript. Harry Crocker Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.


Film Weekly June 24, 1939 [England].

Film Weekly May 27, 1939.


Gyssling, Dr. George. Letter to Joseph Breen, Nov. 23, Dec. 6, 1939. Production Code Administration Files, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.

Haesle, Mrs. T. (Riverside, CA). Letter to Jack Warner, Sept. 6, 1939, Folder 2. Production Files: *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, Warner Brothers Archives, University of Southern California.


*Jewish Transcript* December 20, 1940 [Seattle].


*Los Angeles Citizen* April 18, 1913.

*Los Angeles Examiner* Oct. 9, 1937.


*Los Angeles Examiner* June 6, 1939.

*Los Angeles Times* Feb. 21, 1934.

*Los Angeles Times* June 3, 1934.


Los Angeles Times Aug. 16, 1938.
Los Angeles Times Aug. 21, 1938.
Los Angeles Times Nov. 17, 1938.
Los Angeles Times Aug. 7, 1940.
Luraschi, Luigi. Letter to Joseph Breen, December 10, 1938. Production Code Administration Files, Confessions of a Nazi Spy, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.
Motion Picture Herald Sept. 13, 1941.
New York American August 11, 1936.
New York Exhibitors Herald March 16, 1918.
New York Times May 1, 1934.
Pickford, Mary, Scrapbooks. Mary Pickford Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
Production Code Administration Files, *Espionage Agent*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA.


———. Oral History, June 1959, pp. 46, 47. Popular Arts Project, Columbia University Oral History Program, Special Collections Department, Columbia University.


*South Bend Tribune* May 14, 1939.


*Variety* Sept. 10, 1941.


