

HOLLYWOOD THANKS HITLER

Here's news!—An insider's astonishing, ironic revelation of how Der Fuehrer has given American films an era of new, outspoken freedom



BY WILLIAM C. deMILLE

SEVERAL years ago Sinclair Lewis' prophetic novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, was bought for the screen but was forbidden production by arbiters of screen destiny on grounds that the work might jeopardize international relations with a "friendly Power."

Today, in Hollywood, a major picture company is working overtime to make ready, as soon as possible, a film called *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*.

Within the last few weeks word has got about that American motion pictures are finally to be allowed to compare democracy with other forms of government.

Of course we have always been allowed to praise our own government—in fact, expected to; but never before have we been permitted to imply that any other form of government was not equally perfect. The motto of the American screen has been that of the three Chinese monkeys: "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil."

What has changed the viewpoint of our movie commissars that they will risk putting upon the screen ideas which some one might possibly dislike? Who is the knight in shining armor who has slain the dragon which spouted flame whenever Hollywood wished to deal with any vital international question of the day?

The knight's name is Adolf Hitler, and the dragon was called "European market." By killing the sale of American films in most of Europe, Mr. Hitler, aided by the leaders of various other totalitarian states, has finally removed that chance of commercial gain which lies so close to the heart of international politeness. With all hope of profit gone, we can, at last, become properly indignant and raise our voices in shocked protest without any pecuniary regrets.

Years ago, the European market was just a nice little baby dragon which wouldn't have hurt a soul. It begged prettily for American films, which it lapped up in amazing quantity, digested easily, and really paid for. But as the power of motion pictures to make friends and influence people began to be felt, the little dragon began to feel his own importance and insisted that the celluloid be flavored to suit his taste.

Der Fuehrer and American films

By this time American producers were depending upon the foreign market to keep them out of the red. Therefore they heeded the dragon's voice. And the resulting restrictions, mind you, were in addition to our local rules and regulations, which aimed to please all our own organized groups: churches, women's clubs, bar associations, medical associations, legislatures, censorship boards, the S. P. C. A., the S. P. C. C., the League of Decency, and a hundred other bands of earnest citizens ready to scream that motion pictures were doing the devil's work if a film stepped upon any one of their multifarious toes.

Let those who criticize the screen for its eternal lack of maturity realize that these well meaning groups have established a virtual reign of terror in Hollywood. Constantly suspended above studio heads is the Damoclean sword of federal censorship. That is why the screen finds it so difficult to deal with most of the facts of life. No politician in office may be corrupt on the screen. No policeman may be false to his trust. No clergyman may fall from grace. There are no houses of prostitution, no prostitutes, no opium joints, and no drug traffic.

For many years villains of the screen have had no nationality. Any hint that a gangster was of Italian vintage was followed by lupine howlings from the Tiber. If a screen malefactor had just a trace of Teutonic accent, Berlin immediately threatened to punish ten thousand German Jews for the offense, and it hinted that if our screens showed any German Aryan doing anything unworthy of a superman, the Gestapo would ultimately take the whole United States into protective custody.

Even Mexico let it be known that, as far as the screen was concerned, there were no Mexican bandits or bad men. And Mexico is a good customer.

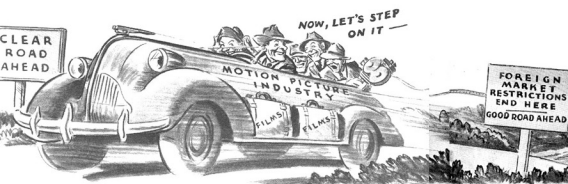
Threatened by so many despots both at home and abroad, it was inevitable that Hollywood should have acquired an oppressed minority—a group of intellectual refugees, made up of certain writers, directors, and producers who were anxious to deal on the screen with vital problems of today without being compelled to pussy-foot. Well known dramatists, lured by huge salaries, found their hands tied when it came to grasping an important subject without gloves. The dramatists sighed, and settled down to writing new versions of Tarzan, Dracula, Frankenstein, and other less important matters.

Directors and producers who yearned to grapple with political, economic, or social questions were told gently but firmly by the Hays office that such pictures were fine and added much to the industry's dignity—only the answer, in every case, had to be that our present system is perfect, all our laws wise, and that what may look to some people like social injustice is due merely to an unfortunate set of circumstances for which no one is to blame and which nobody can help.

The would-be torchbearers sadly doused their torches and went back to making gigantic productions of Little Women and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.

But now Hollywood's oppressed minority sees a ray of hope. An open season has been declared on dictators and subversive elements in our own back yards.

Hitler has thrown us out, bag and baggage—Protestant, Jew, and Catholic. No one in Germany, except the German people, wants to see an American film, and the people find it wiser to leave their desire unuttered. Mussolini has cut his supply of American pictures down to an absolute minimum and insists that we take our pay in spaghetti. It is quite possible that these two iron-handed gentlemen have started something which may lead to a Declaration of Independence for the American screen.



Der Fuehrer and American films

It is more than likely that the various reasons given for barring or limiting American films are merely excuses. The real reason is fear. Dictators do not want their followers to see the life of a people who have freedom of thought, of politics, and of religion; to feel the joy of living which permeates most American films as a result of individual liberty. They want their people to see America as a land in which democracy has failed; where all women are jitterbugs and most men gangsters; where lynching has become a substitute for law, and desire for wealth the sole national motive; where most of the population is unemployed, the rest underpaid, and the government interested only in collecting unjust debts from poor but honest foreigners.

From their own points of view the dictators are quite right. American pictures, reflecting as they do the everyday life, customs, habits, and psychology of the American people, are much too dangerous to be allowed to make their appeal to populations under yokes. The average American today is still better off and lives a fuller life than the average citizen of any other country. Even our unemployed have a better time than many who are "employed" in Germany. But because our economic machine has not been running smoothly, an opportunity has arisen for missionaries of European systems to work upon the minds of those who are bewildered. This is for the most part a danger deliberately aimed at us from outside, engineered by those to whom individual liberty means the end of their political system.

The best way to deal with these foreign gophers making tunnels through American soil is not to silence them but to answer them. And they can best be answered on the screen—the screen with its brakes off.

Our people, as a whole, read few editorials, but they listen to the radio, and more than half of them go to a movie every week. With the screen free to express itself politically, enemies of democracy would finally become aware of their unpopularity. Up to now, when they have been able to assemble a few thousand people in beer halls, they have mistaken the echoes of their own voices for public response. Once the screen is allowed to show what conditions really are under totalitarian rule, it will be hard for any brown-shirted enthusiast to sell this form of government to many Americans.

In line with American tradition, let the screen even present the Nazi arguments rather than try to win the debate by suppressing all opposition. If the full doctrine of totalitarianism were exposed to the great mass of our free people, it would be completely rejected. Let the screen show that the dictator governments depend upon armed minorities taking charge of the people and establishing their system by force, fear, and suppression. These have been the methods successfully used in Rome, Berlin, Moscow, and Jersey City.

If hyphenated Americans or foreign guests clad in fancy uniforms wish to mount soapboxes and proclaim the power and the glory of the Third Reich, they have a right to do so as long as they commit no overt act. But, in answer, let the screen show why thinkers, writers, musicians, and scientists, Aryan as well as Jewish, have fled the dictator countries rather than abandon their ideals. Let our people realize that in those countries Truth, Beauty, and Humanity wear the livery of the State. Art and literature are in bondage. They must confine themselves to an arbitrary set of opinions formulated by the government.

For years Hollywood has longed to take part in the world-wide discussions which events in Europe have provoked. But it was never allowed to cast a vote or voice a conviction. Both sides in Spain were right, both sides in China were right, the conquest of Abyssinia was Il Duce's private business. But finally the ingenious Nazis tried the profitable device of kidnaping a large section of their own people, despoiling them of all possessions and then offering them for ransom, in packages of five, to the rest of the world to save them from being tortured to death. At this point powerful motion-picture leaders decided that international courtesy might, after all, be overdone.

Der Fuehrer and American films

Now it can be told upon the screen, and it will be told, we hope, with no punches pulled.

Messrs. Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels may not be achieving much in the way of human freedom in their own land, but, unintentionally and indirectly, they have struck a mighty blow for liberty in ours.

Liberty

FEBRUARY 11, 1939

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