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HOLLYWOOD MOVIE'S PRO-INTERVENTION PROPAGANDA BEFORE WORLD WAR TWO

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Abstract. Before World War Two, Hollywood movie's attitudes to intervention is underwent a progressive change. Before the early 1930s, several reasons guided Hollywood movies to focus mainly on entertainment and avoid being interventionist. After that, Hollywood movie began to take an entirely different standpoint. This new standpoint of interventionism became more and more dramatic and explicit after 1938. This paper records the progressive development of Hollywood movie's changing positions to interventionism. Meanwhile, the reasons concerning this change are also exemplified, which, the paper finally points out, will help a lot to understand the propaganda role played by Hollywood movie during World War Two.

Keywords: Hollywood movie; pro-intervention propaganda; reasons

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World War One revived America's long tradition of isolationism. To American people, World War One was a total failure. The war, they argued, had led to depression at home and had not made the world safe for democracy internationally. Greatly disillusioned, isolationism once again became dominant when dealing with foreign affairs. This sentiment also greatly influenced Hollywood movies and dumbed many attempts of interventionism in the movies after the war.

The second factor leading to Hollywood's un-interventional position was its economic benefits in foreign markets. During the interwar years, Hollywood substantial part of profits was heavily dependent on overseas box-office receipts.

Before World War One, American-produced movies did not gain any advantage in both domestic and international markets in competition with the movies from such countries as Italy, France and Germany. World War One changed this pattern. During World War One and the following less than three years, America-produced movies occupied not only their own domestic market but also much of the international market.⁽¹⁾ This situation continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. During the early

1930s, the increasing hostility from Nazi rise in Europe began to shrink Hollywood's foreign revenues. In spite of this, foreign markets still accounted for at least 35% of Hollywood's total revenues.⁽²⁾ Therefore, the studios were reluctant to offend foreign sensitivities by producing pro-interventionism films and further reduce their markets.

In Hollywood, Production Code Administration (PCA) is responsible for supervising the picturing of foreign countries. PCA is a self-regulation system in Hollywood, was created and administered by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). It watches closely and cautiously those exported films and deleted every possible piece of content offensive to foreign countries with the purpose of maximizing international receipts. Any films generating diplomatic controversy and diplomatic crises were usually either remedied or withdrawn from the circulation.

What's more, American people have a long tradition of hating propaganda and World War One adds more strength to this hatred. American people believed that they were deceived into the Great War by Britain, which spread unsubstantiated rumors of German atrocities.⁽³⁾ That is why America quickly dismantled the Committee on Public Information, the first U.S. propaganda agency, right after the war and was very reluctant to build another coordinated propaganda agency during the interwar years even though the threat of Nazism was becoming more and more explicit. This sentiment also led American people especially alert on the pro-interventionism Hollywood movies.

The above-mentioned elements dramatically influenced Hollywood movies after World War One, which laid more emphasis on "pure entertainment". As Francis Harmon maintained, "the primary function of the motion picture theater is to entertain."⁽⁴⁾ Meanwhile, the films also show strong opposition to interventionism, which could be properly shown by the antiwar movies. The best example is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and the great popularity it gained further stimulated Hollywood to produce more similar movies. A round of anti-war films, therefore, were produced and released between 1930 and 1934, such as *Journey's End* (1930), *Dawn Patrol* (1930), *A Farewell to Arms* (1932), *The Eagle and the Hawk* (1933), *Ace of Aces* (1933), and *Crimson Romance* (1934), many of which combined thrilling combat with condemnations of wartime slaughters and pleas for peace.

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However, in the early 1930s, as the Nazism gained force in Europe and posed danger to the world, Hollywood began to touch interventionism theme in movies indirectly and implicitly. One of the ways is to reconstruct the concept of "war is good", as an early warning of Nazism threat. Hollywood began to produce pro-war movies such as *Hell's Angels* (1930), *Today We Live* (1933) and *Road to Glory* (1933). Hollywood also cooperated with the military to produce a series of newsreel stories and feature films, dramatic or even musicals to romanticize and embellish war.

Besides the pro-war propaganda, Hollywood movies began to show the potential danger posed by Nazism. As early as 1933, Hollywood had produced movies to warn the nation and the world about the threat of fascism in a mild and indirect way. *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933) demonstrated the process of how a conservative protagonist turning into a New Dealer, implicitly implying the necessity of interventionism. *This Day and Age* (1933) showed that the endangered Americanism was finally defended by youthful vigilantes, who appeared like American traditional Minutemen. It mildly emphasized the importance of war preparation.

As Will H. Hays, the president of MPPDA, said that because American films depicted “the way of life of a free people, the Axis nations virtually declared war on them long before Pearl Harbor”. Hollywood movie’s message, though indirect and implicit in early 1930s, spurred reaction from Nazism. Beginning in 1933, Germany’s Nuremberg Laws allowed the government to censor and/or to ban all films, including American imports. Furthermore, as Hays noticed, “The Nazis not only feared the effects of American films, but they also feared their influence on world opinion. They took all the measures they could to combat the release of our pictures in Latin America and the Far East as well”⁽⁵⁾

German measures damaged Hollywood’s overseas profits, and Hollywood had to be cautious at this moment. At the same time, the situation at home was also not friendly for the criticism of Nazism. Films went too far into controversial and sensitive issues would risk hostile reactions and strong censorship from PCA.

Gradually from the middle of 1930s, as the advancement of fascism in the world and the overseas market shrinking further, Hollywood studios began to show interventionist standpoint a little more explicitly and join with other voices to warn the coming threat from Fascism. The threats to world order by the Italian invasion in Ethiopia in 1935, the Spain Civil War in 1936, and the invasion of Japan into China in 1937 coincided with a burst of Hollywood films that criticized fascism and treated war as a just and exciting adventure, implying the necessity of intervention. *The President Vanishes* (1935) was to show the threat of fascism in the United States. Such films as *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *The Last Outpost* (1935) and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) were to praise war and warn the expansionism of Nazi. *Fury* (1936) emphasized a feature of dictatorships that is often overlooked: their self-proclaimed infallibility. *Range Defenders* (1937) demonstrated the cruelty of Nazi. *Pals of The Saddle* (1937) dealt with the Nazi spy trying to steal away a poison gas formula. *Fire over England* was a British-made movie released in the United States in 1937, strongly advocating to save the world by defending their homeland from foreign tyranny.

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Situations began to change more noticeably from 1938. In this year, Nazi Germany, driven by expansionist policy, escalated its aggression dramatically with annexation of Austria and at the same time increased the persecution of Jews. Hollywood studios had remained cautious on Nazi threat after Hitler took power in 1933, partly to avoid losing the relevant market. Around 1938, Hitler began to cut off the access of American movie industry to the market in both Germany and Germany controlled areas. Later, that ban was copied by Italy. These markets were closed to Hollywood.⁽⁶⁾ Moreover, the other channels such as the newsreel companies began to show the public the bloody and outrageous cruelties of Nazi regime. The most prominent one was Henry Luce’s documentary, *Inside Nazi Germany* (1938). It showed an armed and regimented Germany preparing for aggression.

At the same time, people began to argue that Hollywood had a moral responsibility to educate the public about the evils and the ambition of conquering the whole world of Nazi regime, and that Hollywood should produce more movies to describe the true reality instead of holding on to the traditional entertainment and escapism. Frank Nugent said in 1938 that Hollywood was producing too much entertainment and ignoring the shadow of war overhanging the world. He required filmmakers to describe “some ma-

ture aspect” of the world. In 1939, Harry Warner argued that “our institutions and our principles of government” were in danger, Hollywood should educate, stimulate and demonstrate “the fundamentals of free government.” Independent producer Walter Wanger insisted that Hollywood ought to work with Washington to advance U.S. interests and tell foreign audiences threatened by Nazi authoritarianism “that there still exists a way of life in which the individual” counted and freedom reigned.”⁽⁷⁾

Even Will H. Hays, who has been quite cautious with the movies handling the international affairs, and frequently exclaimed that movies were for entertainment, now came around. In March 1939, he noted that the industry had revised its policy to meet the tastes of the audiences, who now demanded pictures that entertained and at the same time engaged the real world. Accordingly, he agreed on films that “dramatized present-day social conditions,” including those that “dealt with issues of war and peace” or “discussed the values of our present-day democracy.”⁽⁸⁾

President F. D. Roosevelt initiated a re-armament program in 1938, and the military began to adopt more courageous and adventurous policies in cooperating with film industry, and even required to control the way the military was portrayed in the movies. The Army Air Corps pressured Paramount to eliminate all pacifist viewpoints in *Men with Wings* (1938), including eradication of the original ending in which the heroine made a strong condemn of war.⁽⁹⁾ Though this new policy angered the film industry, it did not prevent Hollywood from cooperating with the army.

At this time, Hollywood’s pro-intervention and anti-Nazi stance and propaganda then became more strident and blatant. The studio moguls such as 20th Century Fox Chief Darryl F. Zanuck often spoke out in favor of American intervention. He delivered a speech in 1939, “If [the isolationists] charge us with being anti-Nazi, they’re right. And if they accuse us of producing films in the interest of preparedness and national defense, again they are right”. Walter Wanger also said that movies were to serve “as instruments of democratic communication” “... cinema could provide a vehicle “for inspiring the citizens of a democracy with loyalty, conviction, and courage.”⁽¹⁰⁾

In 1938, it is significant to note that Hollywood released over a dozen pictures with blatantly anti-Nazi and pro-intervention theme. MGM released *Three Comrades* in June 1938 to warn the public the possible threat of Nazism and *Blockade* (1938), a film about the Spanish Civil War, made a strong statement on behalf of the Loyalist cause and advocated for interventionism.

The German invasion into Poland in September 1939 gave Hollywood a new stimulus to make a try. As Will H. Hays have indicated that between 1939 and 1941, about 7.2% of all Hollywood movies were related to the war and Nazism. *Beasts of Berlin* (1939) was the first film of this round. The movie was originally under the title *Hitler, Beast of Berlin* and caused opposition from PCA. The permission to produce was permitted after the title changed. After release, critics generally deemed it an artistic failure but a propaganda triumph. It “pulled no punches” in addressing a topic no other American studio had dared to touch.⁽¹¹⁾

Warner Bros. was the most eager studio to show pro-intervention stance with explicit and daring criticism on fascist threat and cruelty. In 1939, Warner Bros. released *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, a film based on a well-publicized espionage trial in New York. The film adopted semi-documentary techniques and depicted the German-American Bund as a serious threat to national security. It ended with the prosecutor at

the spy trial delivering a speech about the necessity of interventionism. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* performed moderately at the box office. It, however, spurred more controversies than expected. The head of the German-American Bund tried to sue to stop its release in America but didn't succeed; Eighteen foreign countries banned it from being shown; and Germany announced a ban on all future film import that anyone from this film participated in making.⁽¹²⁾

In the last months of 1939, Britain declared war against Germany. After that, more and more film studios began to make films condemning Nazism and depicting the horrors of life under Hitler's regime. Most of these films reached theaters during the summer of 1940.

Meanwhile, besides the entire closed market in German controlled areas by the end of 1930s, in January 1940 PCA no longer prohibited anti-Nazi films that it had imposed after *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. After that, the studios immediately began to produce motion pictures openly critical of Nazism. Within a few months, the *Motion Picture Herald* announced an "all-out production schedule of pictures dealing with the war, national defense preparations of the United States, sabotage and espionage." All in all, the journal reported, 46 pictures and five serials on these subjects were ready to go into production.⁽¹³⁾

MGM released its first attack of Nazism, *The Mortal Storm*, in June 1940. The movie depicted the turmoil and suffering brought by Nazism and aggressively lashed out Nazism and even called Hitler by name. Twentieth-Century Fox released *Four Sons* during the same month as *The Mortal Storm*. It took a firm stance against the Nazis. The 20th Century Fox's next film was *The Man I Married*, released toward the end of summer 1940. This film broke the rules and explicitly blamed Nazism. The script made fun of Hitler and used the German word "Jude" rather than the euphemism "non-Aryan" required by German government.

MGM's *Escape* (1940) daringly and authentically depicted a concentration camp in detail. Again in 1940, a British-produced film *Pastor Hall* was released in America. Based on the true story of Martin Niemoeller, the film depicted a Lutheran pastor in Germany, who was imprisoned for opposing "Nazification" of the church. America's First Lady delivered a spoken prologue for the film, praising its "message of inspiring truth."

Besides the above-mentioned moves directly depicting life under Nazism, the European situations also began to appear as the background for many other types of films, such as romantic comedies, mysteries, and spy adventures. Paramount's romantic comedy *Arise, My Love*, released in October 1940 was a good example. Alfred Hitchcock produced *Foreign Correspondent* to encourage American support for the British war effort. The film made the audience realize the gravity of the fascist threat posed to the whole world and believed that it was impossible for the United States to maintain neutral forever. Even Joseph Goebbels admitted that the film was a "masterpiece of propaganda."⁽¹⁴⁾ One of the most popular films of the year is Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin used this movie simply to tell the audiences that both Germany and Italy, but especially Germany under Hitler, posed an urgent threat to world peace and security.

Throughout the first half of 1941, the war in Europe escalated. American people's opinion shifted steadily away from isolationism to interventionism. Movies became

more explicit in their advocations and supports of the Allied effort and their warnings about the need for American armament and even intervention.

Then there was the case of *Sergeant York* (1941). Released in 1941, this film carefully aimed at pacifism. It demonstrated that pacifism was a wonderful philosophy but it could not be applied to the then situations in World War One. And also, the movie *Convoy* showed the savage attempts of the Nazi raiders, the deathless spirit of Britain, and the gallantry with which the British Navy takes on the enemy against odds. In particular, the need for American preparation for the war became a principal theme in some military films. MGM's film *Flight Command* was about U.S. Navy aviation trainees. In the second half of 1941, the most popular movie was *A Yank in the R.A.F.*, an explicit example to show cooperation between British and American forces, which was the guarantee to accomplish many adventurous deeds. A few months later, Japan attacked the Pearl Harbor and the United States went into the war. This put Hollywood squarely into the war effort.

These films gained more and more popularity among American public. A poll in August showed that at least 20% of those surveyed preferred these kinds of films. This was a dramatic change of people's attitude to the war, the box-office also demonstrated this change. In 1940, *The Fighting 69th*, dealing with an Irish-American unit in World War One, and *The Great Dictator* were among the biggest box-office draws. In 1941, *Sergeant York* and *The Great Dictator* were the two highest-grossing films, with *A Yank in the RAF* and *Dive Bomber* not lagging far behind. Among the comedies dealing with military themes, *Caught in the Draft*, and *Buck Privates* were the most popular ones of 1941. Moreover, a public poll conducted in September 1941 showed that only 16% of those surveyed claimed to have been "annoyed by any propaganda in the feature films" that they had seen watching recently.⁽¹⁵⁾

As Hollywood movies were progressively involved in pro-interventionist stance, the opposing voice from isolationist and pacifists also became louder, which was illustrated clearly in the 1941 Congressional hearings. But its final failure was only another evidence to show the dramatic change of the national atmosphere.

The hearings maintained that Hollywood propaganda films, presenting a one-sided account of the war, posed a serious threat to American people. However, the investigation did not gain what it had expected. One reason was that it was not welcomed by the press. The second was that the investigation was accused of anti-Semitism.⁽¹⁶⁾ The last reason was the strong opposition from Hollywood. Hollywood denied that their films were propagandas. They claimed the films merely accurately portrayed the true reality and that in producing them they were just satisfying public demand.⁽¹⁷⁾

But those isolationist in the hearings correctly labeled Hollywood movies as the propaganda of pro-intervention. They were also accurate when they said that the intent of these films, besides the box-office and offering entertainment, was to persuade America to join the Allies in their struggle against Nazism. For example, the isolationists noted how after the passage of lend-lease, FDR thanked the motion picture industry for its help in "explaining" the Lend-Bill. They also understood the intent in a visit made by Gary Cooper and the makers of *Sergeant York* to the White House soon after the 1941 opening of that film. The relationship between Hollywood and FDR Administration was indeed quite close and this relationship was, to some degree, a complex one.⁽¹⁸⁾

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Several reasons have been offered to explain Hollywood's involvement in pro-interventionist propaganda. Germany's invasion of Poland and the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 is one of them encouraging those to produce pro-interventionism movies. The personal politics of those movie moguls is also one of the reasons. Besides, some studio executives were personal friends of President Roosevelt, and were always ready to explain FDR's policies. Jack and Harry Warner and Walter Wanger went so far as to campaign for FDR's reelection. Warner Bro. had won a reputation as "the Roosevelt studio" for its close ties with FDR's administration. It was especially committed to FDR and the war effort even with special skill. Some scholars also suggested that those former Republican Hollywood moguls set aside their political differences, remaining loyal and even obedient to the president's wishes in producing movies.

Those reasons are not only trying to explain Hollywood's pro-interventionist tendency but also intending to probe into the special relationship between Hollywood and the government during this time.

Actually, American policymakers had recognized Hollywood's powerful influence for a long time. Movies were popular and persuasive. They not only entertained and informed but also moved audiences emotionally. The best propaganda was the least identifiable one. Movies could make propaganda much easier to get to the audiences by injecting the propaganda idea into the medium of an entertainment. So when the need arose to inspire Americans to support the Allies against the Axis powers, the policymakers would turn to film propaganda.

FDR's administration had maintained a close relationship with Hollywood. Besides his close relationship with some Hollywood moguls, FDR himself had used movie to publicize the "New Deal" and to support his reelection. Furthermore, though FDR himself repeatedly claimed not to interfere Hollywood movies, as the war threat became nearer and nearer, he finally ordered to establish relevant agencies to manage movies to serve his big propaganda strategy. In 1939, FDR established the Office of Government Reports (OGR), with Lowell Mellet as the leader. In 1941 while still heading OGR, Mellet was appointed by the President as Coordinator of Government Films to coordinate between the government and Hollywood. In the fall of 1941, FDR established the Office of Facts and Figures to "advise with", through different media including movies, governmental departments and agencies concerning the dissemination of war information. In 1942, FDR established the Office of War Information in charge of World War Two propaganda, which heavily depended on Hollywood movie for propaganda program.

Meanwhile, during 1930s, Hollywood had faced great challenges from different aspects, which dramatically threatened its profitable benefit. It also needs White House's interference. In this way, enlisting picture industry into the government's propaganda program involves a process of communication between Hollywood executives and the government officials, who had divergent priorities. The final result is that a special relationship between them is being formed.

Around 1935, a federal grand jury indicted three leading studios for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. Three years later, the U.S. Department of Justice, reacting to the complaints from independent producers and theater owners, sued Hollywood major studios for violating the Antitrust Act again. In 1939, the Senate held hearings to inves-

tigate the film industry's trade practices, during which representatives of 29 civic and educational organizations testified that there was a connection between the "movie trust" and indecent films. Then a bill to prohibit block booking and blind selling introduced by Senator Matthew Neely passed the Senate later in late 1939. Faced with the pressures from different sources, which could bring devastating damage on major studios' profits, studio representatives, led by Will H. Hays, turned to the White House for relief. Hays asked President Roosevelt's closest friend, Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins, to help Hollywood handle these oppositions. He told Hopkins Hollywood movies were beneficial to the national interest and that they could cultivate patriotism at home and generated goodwill for the United States abroad. Furthermore, movies could help prosper the nation's economy by promoting American commodities internationally. Hays' persuasion worked. In July 1940, federal prosecutors issued a consent decree. Under the terms of this settlement, the Justice Department agreed to drop the antitrust suit and the studios pledged that they would amend their block booking practices by limiting the blocks to no more than five films. It also allowed the studios to retain their theaters.⁽¹⁹⁾

Obviously, White House was not unconditionally helping Hollywood. It needed the movie industry to repay back in propagandizing FDR's policies. Lowell Mellett informed Roosevelt in December 1940 that an "effective plan" for cooperation with Hollywood was "being developed." After this, not only had there been a series of films promoting a martial spirit and interventionism among Americans, but a number of prominent movie stars, including Melvyn Douglas, Errol Flynn, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr., frequently went on the radio to advocate intervention. Early in 1941, Mellett notified FDR that "the motion picture industry is pretty well living up to its offers of cooperation. Practically everything being shown on the screen, from newsreel to fiction, that touches on our national purpose is of the right sort. And there is a lot of it, perhaps almost as much as the picture patrons can take."⁽²⁰⁾ FDR thanked Hollywood, especially the newsreels, for their cooperation. He sent a telegram to be read at that year's Academy Awards ceremony thanking the industry for its support. "We have seen [the American motion picture] reflect our civilization throughout the rest of the world—the aims and the aspirations and the ideals of a free people, and of freedom itself. For all of this, and for your splendid cooperation with all who are directing the expansion of our defense forces, I am glad to thank you. In the weeks and the months that lie ahead, we in Washington know that we shall have your continued aid and support."⁽²¹⁾

White House assistance clearly demonstrated the confidence of FDR administration in the movies' capacity of propaganda.

Now a relationship between Hollywood and FDR Administration was formed, which can be called a relationship of voluntary cooperation with occasional coerce from FDR Administration, for this relationship was sometimes violent. On some occasions, the government would force Hollywood to produce the anticipated movies. As Senator Gerald P. Nye correctly pointed out in 1941 Hearings that "there are Government men on every moving-picture lot" to see that films carried pro-war messages. He also indicated that the administration was forcing the studios to produce films for which there was no real demand. Richard W. Steele has presented considerable evidence that the industry was indeed being coerced. Hollywood columnists Louella Parsons and Jimmie Fidler, meanwhile, claimed that the studios were "losing their shirts" making unpopular anti-Nazi films.⁽²²⁾

During the Second World War, Hollywood had made great contributions to winning the war. The relationship between the state and Hollywood formed before World War Two can be quite helpful to understand the propaganda role played by Hollywood during the war.

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ПРОПАГАНДА ГОЛЛИВУДСКОГО КИНО В ПОДДЕРЖКУ ИНТЕРВЕНЦИИ НАКАНУНЕ ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ

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Аннотация. Перед началом Второй мировой войны отношение голливудского кино к интервенции претерпело постепенные изменения. До начала 1930-х гг. существовал ряд причин, которые побуждали голливудские кино сосредотачиваться в основном на развлечениях и избегать вмешательства в политику. Однако позже Голливуд стал придерживаться совершенно иной точки зрения на интервенционизм, что становилось все более выражено после 1938 г. В статье представлены этапы смены позиции голливудского кино относительно интервенционизма. Причины, вызвавшие эти изменения, во многом помогут понять пропагандистскую роль голливудского кино во время Второй мировой войны.

Ключевые слова: голливудское кино; пропаганда интервенции; причины

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