

# Wartime Hollywood

Since the first scenes of warfare appeared in a brief 1898 silent movie filmed during the Spanish American War, many American films have sought to capture the horror and unbridled heroism, carnage and undaunted courage, the senseless and meaning of warfare. These films explore the realities of combat, the relationships that soldiers form within their units; and the interior mind of soldiers as Wartime Hollywood.

Beginning in September 1941, a Senate subcommittee launched an investigation into whether Hollywood was campaigning to bring the United States into World War II by inserting pro-British and pro-interventionist messages in its films. Isolationist Senator Gerald Nye charged Hollywood with producing "at least twenty pictures in the last year designed to drug the reason of the American people, set aflame their emotions, turn their hatred into a blaze, fill them with fear that Hitler will come over here and capture them." After reading a list of the names of studio executives - many of whom were Jewish - he condemned Hollywood as "a raging volcano of war fever."

While Hollywood did in fact release a few anti-Nazi films, such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, what is remarkable in retrospect is how slowly Hollywood awoke to the fascist threat. Heavily dependent on the European market for revenue, Hollywood feared offending foreign audiences. Indeed, at the Nazis' request, Hollywood actually fired "non-Aryan" employees in its German business offices. Although the industry produced such preparedness films as *Sergeant York*, anti-fascist movies as *The Great Dictator*, and pro-British films as *A Yank in the R.A.F.* between 1939 and 1941, before Pearl Harbor it did not release a single film advocating immediate American intervention in the war on the allies' behalf.

After Pearl Harbor, however, Hollywood quickly enlisted in the war cause. The studios quickly copyrighted topical movie titles like "Sunday in Hawaii," "Yellow Peril," and "V for Victory." Warner Brothers ordered a hasty rewrite of "Across the Pacific" which involved a Japanese plot to blow up Pearl Harbor, changing the setting to the Panama Canal. The use of searchlights at Hollywood premiers was prohibited, and Jack Warner painted a 20-foot arrow atop his studio, reading: "Lockheed - Thataway."

Hollywood's greatest contribution to the war effort was morale. Many of the movies produced during the war were patriotic rallying cries that affirmed a sense of national purpose. Combat films of the war years emphasized patriotism, group effort, and the value of individual sacrifices for a larger cause. They portrayed World War II as a peoples' war, typically featuring a group of men from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are thrown together, tested on the battlefield, and molded into a dedicated fighting unit. Many wartime films featured women characters playing an active role in the war by serving as combat nurses, riveters, welders, and long-suffering mothers who kept the home fires burning. Even cartoons, like Bugs Bunny "Nips the Nips," contributed to morale.

Off the screen, leading actors and actresses led recruitment and bond drives and entertained the troops. Leading directors like Frank Capra, John Ford, and John Huston enlisted and made documentaries to explain, "why we fight" and to offer civilians an idea of what actual combat looked like. In less than a year, 12 percent of all film industry employees entered the armed forces, including Clark Gable, Henry Fonda, and Jimmy Stewart. By the war's end, one-quarter of Hollywood's male employees were in uniform.

Hollywood, like other industries, encountered many wartime problems. The government cut the amount of available film stock by 25 percent and restricted the money that could be spent on sets to \$5,000 for each movie. Nevertheless, the war years proved to be highly profitable for the movie industry. Spurred by shortages of gasoline and tires, as well as the appeal of newsreels, the war boosted movie attendance to near-record levels of 90 million a week.

From the moment America entered the war, Hollywood feared that the industry would be subject to heavy-handed government censorship. But the government itself wanted no repeat of World War I,

when the Committee on Public Information had whipped up anti-German hysteria and oversold the war as "a Crusade not merely to re-win the tomb of Christ, but to bring back to earth the rule of right, the peace, goodwill to men and gentleness he taught." Less than two weeks after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt declared that the movie industry could make "a very useful contribution" to the war effort. But, he went on, "The motion picture industry must remain free . . . I want no censorship."

Convinced that movies could contribute to national morale, but fearing outright censorship, the federal government established two agencies within the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1942 to supervise the film industry: the Bureau of Motion Pictures, which produced educational films and reviewed scripts submitted by the studios, and the Bureau of Censorship, which oversaw film exports.

At the time these agencies were founded, OWI officials were quite unhappy with Hollywood movies, which they considered "escapist and delusive." The movies, these officials believed, failed to convey what the allies were fighting for, grossly exaggerated the extent of Nazi and Japanese espionage and sabotage, portrayed our allies in an offensive manner, and presented a false picture of the United States as a land of gangsters, labor strife, and racial conflict. A study of films issued in 1942 seemed to confirm the OWI concerns. It found that of the films dealing with the war, roughly two-thirds were spy pictures or comedies or musicals about camp life - conveying a highly distorted picture of the war.

To encourage the industry to provide more acceptable films, the Bureau of Motion Pictures issued "The Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture." This manual suggested that before producing a film, moviemakers consider the question: "Will this picture help to win the war?" It also asked the studios to inject images of "people making small sacrifices for victory - making them voluntarily, cheerfully, and because of the people's own sense of responsibility." During its existence, the Bureau evaluated individual film scripts to assess how they depicted war aims, the American military, the enemy, the allies, and the home front.

After the Bureau of Motion Pictures died out in the spring of 1943, government responsibility for monitoring the film industry shifted to the Office of Censorship. This agency prohibited the export of films that showed racial discrimination, depicted Americans as single-handedly winning the war, or painted our allies as imperialists.

**SOURCE:** Digital History. <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/ww2/wartimehollywood.html>