

Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies.

Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black

University of California Press, 1990

Review by Tadashi Hama

A thin section of American history is presented by examining Hollywood films and the decisions of studio executives to make these films during World War II by former Oberlin College professor of history and social activist Clayton Koppes and University of Missouri, Kansas City Professor Gregory Black. The book highlights Franklin D. Roosevelt's efforts to spread a pro-globalist, anti-fascist message via government control of Hollywood. A distillation of the collusion between Roosevelt and his globalist cabal and Hollywood:

“...the propagandists and Hollywood embarked on an uneasy flirtation. The government needed Hollywood, but too much propaganda would wreck the movies' entertainment appeal—the very thing that made the studios attractive to the propagandists. On the other hand, the film makers sincerely wanted to cooperate, but not at the risk of hurting their profits.”

Thus, a time when average Americans were forced to ration basic necessities, Hollywood executives were more than happy to do their part for the war—at a price. Executives either cooperated or out-manuevered the Office of War Information (OWI) to obtain its approval, which was needed to for export and to rake in profits from overseas audiences. Prior to World War II, “40 percent of ... revenues were generated overseas.” Hollywood had a global audience and FDR hoped to utilize Hollywood's reach to spread his message. During the war, Hollywood films would be shown in liberated territories “as soon as the smoke” settled “in the wake of invading armies”—such was Hollywood's desire to promote its products to non-Americans and to reach into their pockets.

The authors assert that “access to information is crucial to democratic citizenship; hence Americans regarded propaganda... with suspicion”. The authors further assert that “since total war requires mass mobilization ... governments find propaganda... indispensable for maintaining civilian and military morale.” Thus, to the authors, free speech is a luxury that can be sacrificed during a national crisis. FDR would be quite comfortable in today's era of “fake news”, social media manipulation and mass censorship. FDR was “the consummate media politician of his day,” as he “influenced public opinion” and “manipulated” the news media. With respect FDR's opponents to his globalist agenda, “because of his efforts, the non-interventionists never received equal time.” Furthermore, FDR “employed the apparatus of the federal government ...including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to harass and discredit his opponents.” FDR created his “official propaganda agency” to “influence public opinion” through a series of executive orders, that is, presidential decrees that bypassed the usual legislative mechanisms “critical to democratic citizenship.” Today, the progressives and globalists praise FDR for his globalist vision but we hear nothing of his abuse of the government and media to

suppress dissent and further his agenda. A small glimpse of FDR's methods is revealed and then the curtains are shut. After all, FDR saved the world from "fascism" and to progressives, the end justifies the means. Readers who want to learn more of Propaganda Minister FDR's machinations will need to read elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the results are endless Hollywood films that cast liberal democracy and globalism in the best light and films that mock "fascists", especially Japanese "fascists". At the outset, the authors claimed that the OWI would eschew "hate propaganda" in favor of the "truth"—that is, the truth as dictated by the OWI and FDR. OWI's pledge to refrain from "hate propaganda" was quickly forgotten. "Movies about Japan made little effort to develop a Japanese character or explain what Japan hoped to accomplish... The Japanese remained nameless, faceless and ... speechless." Furthermore, the authors state that "It was a rare film that did not employ such terms as Japs, beasts, yellow monkeys, nips or slant-eyed rats." In *Little Tokyo, USA*, the opening claimed that 15,000 Japanese Americans were involved in espionage.¹ The story revolves around a white Los Angeles police detective rounding up various suspected Japanese saboteurs. We see the detective, his supervisor and one other beating a suspect in custody purely out of race-hatred. Other Hollywood films about Japan focused on themes of Japanese "treachery" and Japanese "blood lust." In contrast, German soldiers were "often shown as decent human beings distinct from the Nazis."

With respect to casting America and its liberal democratic ideology in the best possible light, America needed to change its own history. For example, references to black slavery or black servants in movie scripts were erased. At the same time, in movies depicting World War II battles, black combat soldiers were shown serving side by side with whites—even though the US military was still racially segregated. Whether through deception or whitewash, it was important for Hollywood to show "unity of color and creeds fighting for America."

The current book is a really a thin slice of the long history of Hollywood's involvement in influencing American and worldwide public opinion. Readers will need to go elsewhere to explore the dominant role assumed by a clannish immigrant ethnic group in the early founding of Hollywood and its use of film as a tool, disguised as entertainment, for mass dispersal of ideology and ethos.² Finding the right ideologies and ethos, disguised as stories, that resonated with American audiences was a surefire way to profits. The stories emanating from Hollywood would change significantly, from post-World War I weariness and America-first, to pre-war messianic globalism. In between, Hollywood edited films

¹ As a side note to *Little Tokyo*: When the Japanese were evacuated from Little Tokyo, Los Angeles following FDR's executive order, black migrants took over the area, as they were forbidden from white areas. Black-owned businesses replaced Japanese ones and the area was re-named "Bronzeville". The area was noted for its crime and "public health concerns". Japanese retuning from their internment demanded return of their property. While there were opportunities for alliance in terms of minority civil rights between blacks and Japanese, there was also much tension between these groups. Natasha Varner (Feb. 23, 2016) "Despite history, Japanese Americans and African Americans are working together to claim their rights." <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-02-23/despite-their-history-japanese-americans-and-african-americans-are-working>

² N. Gabler. *An Empire of their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. NY, NY: Anchor. 1989.

so as not to upset, for example, Nazi sensibilities such that films could be shown in Germany as Germany avidly consumed American films.³ Hollywood is currently doing its best to edit films so as not to offend the Chinese Communist Party in order to gain access to the huge Chinese market. Perhaps in the end profit overrules ideology. Hollywood, despite its American origin, is indeed a global institution.

³ B. Urwand. *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. 2013.