

Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact With Hitler* (Book Review)

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Throughout *Hollywood and Hitler*, Doherty's silver-tongued style shines; it is eminently readable, even enjoyable, and likely to find a nonacademic audience. There is, of course, much more to say, as attested by the increasing interest in Hollywood during this period. As other projects emerge, Doherty's focus on the American trade press may be cast as a limitation. However, contrary to the presumption that the important events happened in backroom deals shrouded in mystery, *Hollywood and Hitler* is important precisely because it reveals just how much was public knowledge. In peppy journalese, the trade press skirted the moral questions and considered the bottom line as they openly and frequently reported on Hollywood's dealing with Nazi Germany and its avoidance of Nazi themes. Assuredly woven together by Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler* reveals just how slowly and half-heartedly Hollywood moved from cowardice and compliance to its wartime role as assumed democratic conscience. This awkward and stumbling shift is truly a story stranger than fiction. Doherty's pioneering research has broken into what is clearly fertile ground.

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BOOK DATA Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. \$35.00 Cloth. 448 pages.

JOHANNES VON MOLTKE

The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler by Ben Urwand

A tireless advocate for alternative (film) histories, the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge has been known to insist "what is unfilmed critiques that which has been filmed" (*das Nichtverfilmte kritisiert das Verfilmte*). From this perspective, the historical record manifest in film titles and release dates hides a latent history of unrealized ideas, unfinished projects, and shelved scripts that demand recognition as correctives to the accepted historical narrative.

Concentrating on Hollywood during the 1930s, *The Collaboration* sets out to provide just such a revisionist account. Scouring the archival record, Ben Urwand retrieves a significant number of unfilmed films: projects championed by enterprising filmmakers who failed to secure the necessary backing from the studios, promising scripts that were abandoned before making it into production, scenes that were left on the cutting-room floor in the process of producing sanitized versions of films that

might otherwise have been considered too provocative. We learn, for example, how the producer Sam Jaffe ran into insurmountable opposition in his attempt to produce Herman J. Mankiewicz's screenplay for *The Mad Dog of Europe*, an early depiction of Hitler's persecution of the Jews; how Nobel laureate Sinclair Lewis's attempts to bring *It Can't Happen Here* to the screen were similarly thwarted; and how Erich Maria Remarque's *Three Comrades*, which in 1938, "could have been the first explicitly anti-Nazi film by an American studio" (192), was wrested from F. Scott Fitzgerald (who had written the script) and purged of all reference to Nazis and Jews alike by the time Frank Borzage was finished directing it. These unrealized or stunted projects implicitly critique those films that did make it to the screen at the time, for according to Urwand, they demonstrate Hollywood's inability to formulate a strong anti-Nazi message and to rally in support of the Jews of Europe.

This much is not entirely new, but where Urwand begins to move beyond earlier accounts of Hollywood's dealings with the Nazis by Ruth Vasey, Steven Carr, and most recently Thomas Doherty (reviewed by Hannah Graves in this issue) is in his claim that the movie industry tended instead to provide tacit support, if not outright endorsement, of Nazi ideology. In his reading, not only does Alfred Werker's *The House of Rothschild* (1934) feed directly into *The Eternal Jew* (1940), Fritz Hippler's infamous Nazi propaganda vehicle that excerpts Werker's feature film, but other Depression-era Hollywood movies, too, come to anticipate or even amount to Nazi propaganda. Here, Urwand's revisionist narrative begins to unravel: *Gabriel over the White House* (Gregory La Cava, 1933), which imagines a dictatorial state of exception to cut through economic and political deadlock in Washington, figures in *The Collaboration* as outright "propaganda for the new Nazi regime" (112); Urwand designates it "the first major fascist motion picture" (107). According to this logic, Gary Cooper "was the most important exponent of the leader principle on the screen" after starring in *The Lives of a Bengal Dancer* (Henry Hathaway, 1935), which opened to positive reviews in Germany; and the protagonist in King Vidor's Depression-era back-to-the-land narrative *Our Daily Bread* (1934) offers a similarly powerful endorsement of the *Führerprinzip*.

The Collaboration is not content to offer revisionist critique; as the book's sensation-seeking title is meant to suggest, it also sets out to assign blame. The film industry's pro-Nazi tendencies and its silence on the Jewish question during the 1930s, Urwand argues, were the result of an unevenly pitched collaboration between the studios and the German government. Clearly aware of the incendiary

overtone of the term in this context, Urwand is careful first to establish the titular collaboration as a matter of archival record, pointing to the frequency with which the mutual wish for *Zusammenarbeit* (which one might also have translated as “cooperation”) figures in letters, documents, and controversies on both sides of the Atlantic. It was, as Urwand concedes, a “complex and multifaceted” relationship, driven as much by the profit motive as by any desire to become involved in or stay out of politics. Only after Hollywood had been banned from doing business in Germany did the studios finally turn against the regime, setting off an intense cycle of anti-Nazi films in the wake of *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939). As William C. DeMille, brother of Cecil, put it, “by killing the sale of American films in most of Europe, Mr. Hitler . . . has finally removed that chance of commercial gain which lies so close to the heart of international politeness” (211).

But the historical and linguistic specificities recede as the notion of collaboration becomes reified in the book’s narrative. Urwand claims to have identified a regular “policy” under which “Hollywood studios . . . released ‘one pro-Fascist film after another’” during the 1930s (175). By the time we read that an article from a 1932 (i.e., pre-Nazi) German censorship law provided a way of “regulating the American film industry,” we have to ask ourselves whether the revisionist historical imagination that animates this book is impoverished or overheated. This is not to dispute that the long arm of the Nazi state reached the United States, whether through notorious figures such as the Los Angeles–based German consul Georg Gyssling, through legal and commercial threats, or through the demographics of the proverbial “fifth column.” And Urwand is certainly right to ask—as others have—why “the powerful [Jewish] executives chose to do business with the most anti-Semitic regime in history.” To answer this question, he clocked many hours in archives on both sides of the Atlantic, where he traced relevant correspondence, scoured minutes from censorship meetings, read Nazi reviews of American films, and tracked the flows of money from and to the Hollywood studios as far as the German armament industry. But his historical vision seems clouded by several failures to imagine more nuanced interpretations of his materials.

Thus, to describe Hollywood’s business dealings during the 1930s in the subtitle and elsewhere as a “pact with Hitler” in which Germany managed to “terrorize” the studios is too fanciful and falls short because Urwand fails to consider more proximate explanations for the studios’ romance with dictatorship in the early 1930s or their

subsequent failure to represent either the Nazis or the Jews. In his eagerness to indict Hollywood for collaboration with Germany, he all but overlooks standard Hollywood practices, home-grown fears, economic and political concerns of the New Deal era, deep-seated anxieties about the stability of democracy, and isolationist policy and sentiment, as well as American anti-Semitism. When it comes to the films themselves, Urwand similarly overreaches and underreports their complexity: He hews to a literalist notion of plot and meaning, reducing *Gabriel over the White House* straightforwardly to a fascist film and allowing Nazi appreciation of Capra’s New Deal films to taint the latter as profascist propaganda rather than considering their striking openness to divergent forms of political instrumentalization. A trained historian, Urwand finally displays an overeagerness to judge the historical actors according to a moral standard that becomes apparent at the close of the book. Here, he forsakes the historical narrative and the argument about the politics of cinema during the 1930s in favor of a hagiographic portrait of Ben Hecht; using only the flimsy rationale that Hecht came from Hollywood, Urwand indicts the film industry for having failed to follow the former screenwriter by turning from the business of film to the politics of Jewish rescue. And so we arrive at the epilogue, which with the help of a couple of photographs but without any real argumentation, insinuates that studio executives who toured Germany after the end of the war were insensitive opportunists at best, colonizing profit-mongers at worst. The mere mention that the executives’ itinerary included a trip up the Rhine on Hitler’s personal yacht is presumably intended to cement the book’s overall indictment of the studios, driving home their guilt by association.

One is left with the impression that the author is unable fully to imagine the messiness either of the movies and their power to mean different things to different people or of the film business: In both the run-up to World War II and its aftermath, that business required—as Urwand’s archival findings surely demonstrate—an ongoing negotiation of politics and textual detail, culture and profit. To reduce them to a collaborationist “pact” is to overburden and underanalyze the historical record.

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BOOK DATA Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2013. \$26.95 Cloth. 336 pages.

The Collaboration book. Read 27 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. To continue doing business in Germany after Hitler's ascent to power. Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler" as Want to Read: Want to Read: Want to Read. The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact With Hitler. Ben Urwand. Adolf Hitler was obsessive about films; he aimed to watch one a night. Though the Nazi obsession with film has been the subject of numerous books, the direct influence of the Nazis on Hollywood in the 1930s has, until now, been overlooked. The Collaboration, over-excitedly subtitled "Hollywood's Pact With Hitler", attempts to redress the balance. Its author, Ben Urwand, forcefully argues that throughout the 1930s Hollywood studios "put profit above principle in their decision to do business with the Nazis." The studio heads, who were mostly immigrant Jews, went to dramatic lengths to hold on to their investment in Germany. Hollywood and Hitler suggests that Urwand seriously overstates his case. While ranging into such fascinating issues as Hollywood's odd decision to lionize Benito Mussolini's son Vittorio in 1937, its fierce rejection of Leni Riefenstahl a year later, and the structure and history of the newsreel business, Doherty provides a more sober appraisal of the relationship between Hollywood and the Nazis. What emerges is not a portrait of a sinister pact of collaboration, but an all too familiar story of how economic forces can knock our moral compasses off-center. While it is appropriate to regard "The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler" as a 2013 non-fiction book by Ben Urwand. It was published on September 9, 2013 by Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press. It is about cooperation between 1930s U.S. filmmakers and Nazi Germany. According to the book the assistance was done for monetary reasons and because some film industry executives who were Jewish believed that antisemitism would increase if films were too obviously pleading for assistance for Jews. Urwand believes