A Just Estimate of a Lie: A Historiography of World War II Era Propaganda Films

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Introduction

Heroes and monsters have reared their heads on celluloid in every corner of the globe, either to conquer and corrupt or to defend wholesome peace. Others grasp at a future they believe they have been denied. Such were the tales of World War II-era propaganda films and since their release, they have been at turns examined, defended, and vilified by American and British historians. Racism, sentiments of isolationism, political and social context, and developments in historical schools of thought have worked to alter historical interpretations of this subject matter. Four periods of historical study: 1960s postwar Orthodox reactions to the violence and tension of the war-period, the revisionist works of 1970s social historians, 1990s Postmodernism, and recent historical scholarship focused on popular culture and memory- have all provided significant input on WWII-era propaganda film studies. Each was affected by previous historical ideologies and concurrent events to shape their final products. Economic history, left-leaning liberal ideology, cultural discourse, and women's studies have also added additional insight into the scholarly interpretations of these films.

There is no decisive historiography of WWII propaganda studies and there is even less organized work on the historical value of propaganda films. My research is intended as a humble effort to examine the most prolific period of global propaganda film production and how the academic world has remembered, revered, and reviled it since. This historiographical work is not intended to be an exhaustive review of every film or scholarly insight offered on the subject. I have restricted my research to the scholarly publications of American and British historians and their interpretations of German, American, and British propaganda films. As my bibliography indicates, I began my research by looking at WWII propaganda films from a global perspective, but the scope of my research was narrowed in the interest of the limited space afforded to an essay format. As a result, I was able to devote greater attention to the reoccurring examinations of specific films by scholars of different fields of thought. My earnest effort to capture the tumultuous relationship between historical scholarship, media, and conflict is responsible for the narrative I present here.

Current and past conflicts are a common catalyst for propaganda. In 1942 the chairman of the Committee of Public Information, George Creel, offered an exceedingly simple definition of propaganda: "the fight for public opinion- as integral a part of any war machine as ships, guns, and planes."[1] Modern definitions of propaganda are far more complex, a subject to which entire monographs are devoted. Garth Jowett's and Victoria O'Donnell's *Propaganda and*

[1] George Creel, "Propaganda and Morale," *American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 3 (November 1941): 340.

Persuasion, the standard for historical propaganda scholarship for over twenty-five years, has widened the definition to include commercial advertisements, mass media, and censorship. Jowett and O'Donnell have defined any form of communication that attempts to disseminate or maintain an idea with the intent of shaping public perceptions as propaganda.[2] During WWII, the American government had a very similar understanding of propaganda and wielded control over the popularly consumed feature film industry in all these regards.

The Office of War Information (OWI), which managed the output of public media during WWII, devoted considerable attention to the American film industry. The bureau sent representatives to evaluate screenplays and to oversee plot-development meetings. They circulated manuals instructing filmmakers, directors and publication companies on the patriotic responsibilities of the film industry. In some instances, the agency would directly write dialogue for key scenes or pressure a studio to censor films that did not promote the government's wartime ideologies. This level of involvement indicates the perceived value of film in reaching and influencing the masses.[3] Overseas, the British, German, and Japanese governments were just as actively engaged with their respective film entertainment industries. As a result, WWII witnessed a greater production of propaganda films than its predecessor, spanning newsreels, documentaries, and feature films in numbers that some historians have argued outmatch any war before or after.[4] This wholesale commitment of government funds and attention to the entertainment industry during a period of intense warfare has since attracted academic inquiry by political science scholars, students of media, and historians.

The Roots of Post-War Historical Orthodoxy: Polarization and Political Divides

Any intellectual inquiry into propaganda film historiography necessitates an understanding of American and British scholarship before WWII. The horrors of the first global war had left an indelible mark upon the human psyche and historians worked to root out what had gone awry in the past. Many western scholars whose nations had opposed German eastern European dominion began to shift their attitudes away from the World War I orthodoxy of the early interwar period, which typified Germans and Austrians as the antagonists of the war, to a more self-reflexive critique.[5] The American historian Sidney B. Fay, the author of one the most significant contemporary texts on the origins of WWI , suggested that political attitudes within historical scholarship were a source of inflamed tensions. In the 1920s he proclaimed that certain ideas in the academic community during WWI had been fueled "by a great deal of silly propaganda [...] and that some day documents would be published that would allow historians to arrive at a more just estimate."[6] The emphasis on blame in war origin research, prominent

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[2] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria J. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (New York: Sage Publications, 2011), 7-9.
[3] Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (University of California Press, 1987), vii-viii.
[4] John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert, eds., *World War II, Film, and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii.
[5] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 207-208.
[6] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 208.

among scholarship of this period, threatened to obscure academic perceptions of the past and offered little more than a myopic prediction about the catalysts for global warfare. Fay's commentary, among others, suggests academia's growing suspicions of propaganda's influence on historical objectivity, but this line of discourse was subverted by the reemergence of war after Hitler's invasion of Poland. Thoughout the 1940s and 1950s, the propagated slogans, symbols, overtones, and attitudes from previous decades returned to the Western world at large.[7] By WWII's end, orthodox historical writing witnessed a temporary resurgence. The majority of post-war American and British historians set the precedence of the WWII narrative by returning to the traditional themes of history as a triumphal contest between the oppositional forces of good and evil.

No figure in American and British propaganda historiography would be demonized more easily than Dr. Joesph Goebbels, German Reich Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment. Handpicked by Adolf Hitler to lead Nazi propaganda film production, he was an attractive source for propaganda scholarship by orthodox historians searching for uncomplicated vilifications of Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war. Scholarship representing a marked turn away from the more evenhanded work of the interwar years flourished after the discovery Goebbels's diary, which had failed to burn properly in the data purge as the National Socialists prepared to surrender. Postwar orthodox historians were all too eager to eke out the indicators of malevolent intention from the personal writing of the propagandist.

Among them was the British historian of Britain and Nazi Germany, Hugh Trevor-Roper. Trevor-Roper's *Final Entries 1945: The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels* (1945) was rushed to print in the same year as Goebbels' final entries. His reading of the diary determined that Goebbels' only talent was as a "mob orator and manipulator," and that despite the success of his films, all German propaganda was "crude and violent in form, utterly unscrupulous in substance, and quite indifferent to the truth."[8] His book reproduced portions of Goebbels' diary that emphasized Goebbels' bitterness towards others and propensity for dishonesty, punctuated by personal anecdotes of Trevor-Roper's brief (and contentious) relationship with the Reich Minister. Trevor-Roper's work, while bias-laden and typified by vitriolic language, was not out of place in orthodox historical scholarship produced as the war came to an end. The more reserved Fay also promulgated an unapologetic condemnation of Goebbels' work. In his professional opinion, the wholesale "lies and censorship" that the German propagandist had produced necessitated the re-education of German prisoners-of-war, although Fay refused to go so far as to advocate for lessons on American democracy.[9] The debasement of WWII German film productions and the insistence of scholars of this period that the productions were solely malicious brainwashing eliminated opportunities for a critical assessment of Goebbels' films.

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[7] Andrei S. Markovits, "The European and American Left since 1945," *Dissent* 52, no. 1 (January 2005): 6.
[8] Hugh Trevor-Roper, ed., *Final Entries 1945: The Diaries of Joseph Goebbels* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), xv. Originally published in German under the title *Tagebücher* (1945).
[9] Sidney B. Fay, "German Prisoners of War," *Current History* 8, no. 43 (March 1, 1945): 199.

Social Historiography: Art and the Audience

The collective sense of conviction and righteousness would eventually abate, giving way to self-reflection and doubt about the blind vilification of national opponents. As pointed out by the American historian and foremost scholar of Eastern European history, Wayne S. Vucinich, the uses of orthodox approaches to postwar history threatened historical objectivity through inherent "dogmatism, [...] unilinear evolutionary theory, an exaggerated reliance on economic determinism, and nationalistic coloring."[10] Vucinich expressed concerns that Post-war orthodox readings of propaganda would be utilized to erase the past and muddy the record.[11] By the late 1960s, historians veered away from emphasizing conflict origins as the focal point of propaganda studies, seeking to divert the attention to a more critical assessment of film as a complex vehicle for ideological dissemination. While reactionary postwar historians had emphasized the dogmatic motivations of film propagandists, writing their history with aggravated polarization, later historiography needed a new approach.

Some of the first to take this challenge were Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel. Manvell was a former first director of the British Film Academy and propagandist turned scholarly author and film historian by WWII's end. Fraenkel was a Polish refugee of Jewish descent and biographer of Nazi war criminals who had fled to Britain. Like Trevor-Roper, Manvell and Fraenkel were both survivors of WWII, but their collaborative approach to the war's most hated propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, was very different than that of their predecessor.

In their study, *Doctor Goebbels: His Life and Death* (1960), Manvell and Fraenkel also utilized Goebbels's diary to examine the Reich Minster's intentions behind the creation of the Axis's most notorious films. Their work covered the early propagation of racist attitudes against the Jewish poor in *The Eternal Jew* (1940), to the lavish and desperate re-release of *Ohm Krüger* (1944), a narrative of counterfactual predictions for British defeat as punishment for the island nation's colonial past. Their reading highlighted Goebbels's approach to propaganda films as a tool to bring his people together and design a patriotic national memory. The historians quoted Goebbels's belief that the Nationalist Socialist Party would, "infuse into art new impulses which shall deepen public understanding of the greatness of time," and "in the domain of film the directive is the most important encouragement and stimulus to creation."[12] The excerpts selected by Manvell and Fraenkel moderated the more extreme characterizations of the propagandist as inherently depraved and portrayed a man who was both infatuated with Hitler and his status in the Nazi party, but also with film as an art form. By emphasizing the complexities of Goebbels' human nature, attention was drawn away from Goebbels' guilt as a source of war conflict and focused instead on his cinematic influence. By not seeking to determine blame, historians like Manvell and Fraenkel unearthed anomalies in the film archive. In particular, the historians claimed that the newsreel films *Victory in the West* (1941), *Baptism of Fire* (1943), and *The Eternal Jew* were some of the regime's most

[10] Wayne S. Vucinich, "Postwar Yugoslav Historiography," *The Journal of Modern History* 23, no. 1 (1951): 41.
[11] *Ibid*., 42.
[12] Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *Doctor Goebbels: His Life and Death* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 191.

poisonous. Persistent antisemitism in the postwar period had resulted in minimal historical inquest into Nazi films on the so-called "Jewish problem" outside of the characterization of German propagandists as hateful and inhumane.[13] Manvell and Fraenkel, however, reported that *The Eternal Jew* was largely "a violent and [...] obscene attack on the Jews."

Their analysis also focused heavily on the stylistic elements of Nazi propaganda. In particular, they argued that cinematic cutaway shots and selective ordering of scenes were indicative of Goebbels' skillful use of film to impart emotion and imagined narratives to an audience.[14] Manvell and Fraenkel critiqued *Baptism of Fire's* longshots of continuous shelling on Warsaw buildings in which a narrator commented on the hopelessness of Polish resistance, as well as the images of destruction, buttressed with empowering crescendos of Wagnerian music, in both *Baptism of Fire* and *Victory in the West*. These two historians claimed that these films, all produced early in the war, were the types that epitomized film propaganda and the creators' intentions to froth up the population in support of the war effort.[15]

Against this familiar WWII propaganda film backdrop, Manvell and Fraenkel then contrasted anomalies in the historical record. Chief among these, *Ohm Krüger* and *Kolberg* (1945) Goebbels made use of as a personal creative outlet. The propagandist participated in the production of *Ohm Krüger* more than any other film during his career. In the opening scene, as the film's central character lays dying, he tells his nurse, "One must be a dreamer to become a ruler." Manvell and Fraenkel's research suggests that Goebbels had authored the line himself, utilizing his access to the large-scale film production to participate actively in the craft.[16] On a more grandiose scale than *Ohm Krüger*, *Kolberg* (1945) remained elusive to interpretation. While the production met all the criteria of propaganda, the scale of creative extravagance contained in it represented a break from Goebbels's "total war" purpose-driven endeavors.[17] Ultimately, Manvell and Fraenkel were unable to make a decisive statement about the film's purpose, but they expressed a certainty that the production represented a drive to create more than a simplistic war narrative. Within these films, Manvell and Fraenkel disagreed with previous Post-war orthodox historical writing that the Reich Minister wielded propaganda at all points as a purely manipulative tool to assert Aryan dominance in public life. *Kolberg* especially would continue to raise questions for film historians in the following decades, with each subsequent school of thought providing new theories to their readings of it.

Scholarly investigation into WWII propaganda films did not terminate at the German border. Prior to the 1960s, American and British historians had a different relationship with Allied propaganda films. Manvell, in his 1947 essay *Twenty Years of British Film*, claimed that Allied filmmakers "faithfully" depicted the humble heroics of combatants and were "only too conscious of the emotional implications and the wider national significance of the stories they

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[13] Bendersky, Joseph W., "The Absent Presence: Enduring Images of Jews in United States Military History," *American Jewish History* 89, no. 4 (December 2001): 415-416.
[14] Manvell and Fraenkel, *Doctor Goebbels*, 192.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] Manvell and Fraenkel, *Doctor Goebbels*, 193-194.
[17] *Ibid*., 276.

were representing."[18] In contrast, Lewis Jacobs, a former director and American film historian, published his impressions on American WWII propaganda films in the *Cinematic Journal* in the 1960s. The central subject of his article, "World War II and the American Film," (1967) was the immediate shift in the purpose of film production upon American entry into the war. Before American engagement, popular feature film producers were introducing subtle tonal shifts into their work, with the blessings of President Roosevelt, to break the isolationist mindset of the interwar period.

Jacobs utilized the dramatic film, *The Mortal Storm* (1940), to tease out the attitudes of filmmakers before Pearl Harbor. The plot is focused on the plight of a Jewish professor, Viktor Roth, in Germany. After refusing to retract a publication that argued all human blood was the same, his family faces subsequent destruction by the National Socialist Party. This feature film was designed to serve as an early wake-up call for audiences, well before the war was a popular one. Close-ups shots were a favorite tool of the director, Frank Borzage, utilized to foreshadow death and to grant spiritual significance to his characters.[19] The tight framing of Roth's face as he bids his wife farewell through the fencing of a concentration camp humanized Jewish victims of Nazi violence for American audiences. It was the first American film to take place within Germany since the war began, to feature the terror tactics used on everyday citizens, and to call Hitler by name. Public reactions to *The Mortal Storm* represented the decisive influence of filmmakers' storytelling and the power of propaganda to reach American audiences.[20] However, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hollywood began producing intentionally propagandistic films committed to "[total engagement] in the obligations and demands of a government at war."[21] Jacobs' writing in the 1960s exemplified a shift in the scholarship of some American and British historians away from the sanctification of American film propagandists. Instead of the positive literary descriptions of American propaganda films and their producers, which assuaged the Allied war guilt of post-war orthodox historians, Jacobs' article focused on the combat-oriented mindset of American WWII film propagandists. Emotional and political manipulation began to be discussed as tactics of American film propagandists and a substantial facet of the total war effort.

While films like *The Mortal* Storm succeeding in drumming up American approval, not all pictures were as triumphant in inveigling public support. *Mission to Moscow* (1943), designed to encourage fraternity between allies on the war front, attempted to reverse popular attitudes towards Russia. The shots and linguistic material were drafted from factual historical data, including diary entries from the former American Ambassador to Russia, Joseph E. Davies, and confidential reports from the U.S. Department of State. Mimicking the stylization of a documentary film, the picture intended to purify Stalin and his government during the Moscow

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[18] Roger Manvell, "The British Film Feature from 1940 to 1945," in *Twenty Years of British Film 1925-1945*, ed. Michael Balcon, Facsimile of 1947 ed, The Literature of Cinema, II (Stratford: Ayer Company Publishers, 1972), 89.

[19] Maria Elena de Las Carreras Kuntz, "The Catholic Vision in Hollywood: Ford, Capra, Borzage and Hitchcock," *Film History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 129.

[20] Lewis Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," *Cinema Journal* 7 (1967): 4, https://doi.org/10.2307/1224874.

[21] Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," 1-2.

purge trials. The visual likeness between the actors and the real individuals they depicted, including Roosevelt, Stalin, Churchill, and Trotsky, determined the casting choices.

Jacobs criticized the liberties the filmmakers took in blurring the lines of truth, presenting reproductions of genuine historical documents alongside trial transcripts that the historian implied were forgeries. The film portrayed Stalin as dispensing judicial treatment on Trotsky, whose guilt is suggested through his conspiratorial contacts with Germany and Japan. Americans reacted to this film with blustering disdain, proclaiming, in the statement by John Haynes Holmes selected by Jacobs, that "as history it is a lie, as propaganda it is a scandal of the first order."[22] While *Mission to Moscow* was not received with blind acceptance, viewers consumed many films without the same skepticism and historians would become more interested in the dynamic between the screen and those that filled the seats in the coming decade.

Historians in the 1970s, interested in investigating cultural context and the significance of individual human agency, became increasingly attentive to the relationship between the audience and film. Largely influenced by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964), American historians became profoundly invested in the daily life experiences of the lower social classes.[23] New sources of historical inquiry, in which cultural behaviors formed collective identities, seemed to reveal the impetus that drove the actions of individuals and thus history at large. The actions of significant historical figures, according to these new social historians, were driven by their responses to their respective societies.[24] Thus, the social actions of average individuals who had experienced the emotional appeals and ideologies woven into WWII era propaganda films now had the potential, according to these historians, to have altered the direction of history.

The social historians who came into the profession in the 70s were interested in the role of films as points of social gathering and shared ground. They also produced their revisionist interpretations of the historians of the 50s and 60s. These social historians, rather than concentrating solely on the roles of artistically skilled directors and writers, began studying how ordinary members of an audience consumed propaganda films. Historians in the 70s were often interested in people who were not particularly linguistically talented or even literate.[25] This reading of history presented a new way to explore propaganda films, wherein sound and images were used to reach average people without necessarily appealing to their intellects. Some, such as the film historian and coordinator of popular culture studies at Morgan State University, Thomas Cripps, emphasized the fact that these types of individuals were the intended audience of these productions.[26] Cripps argued that new approaches, utilizing social anthropological and cultural factors, were required to examine the significance of propaganda films to history.

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[22] Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," 16-18.
[23] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 440-441.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 469.
[26] Thomas Cripps, "Film: The Historians' Dangerous Friend," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 1975): 6–8.

Allan M. Winkler, still in the early days of his historical career, responded to his call. In his first book, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information 1942-1945* (1978), Winkler commented on the scholarship that had preceded him. He criticized interwar historians who, aggravated by misguided isolationism, had viewed the subject of propaganda after WWI "with a morbid fascination."[27] For their part, Winkler felt the postwar historians of the 1950s studied propaganda films through a perspective inflamed by WWII's democratic interventionism, intended to counter the approaches of their predecessors. However, by the 1960s scholars had begun to approach WWII propaganda films with greater detachment. Winkler proposed that the academic community was now in need of a new perspective from which to view their subjects, which he hoped to offer through his research.

In Winkler's study of the Office of War Information (the American governmental body responsible for overseeing the production of WWII-era propaganda films), he devoted a great deal of attention to the cultural icon and playwright, Robert Sherwood. Winkler began his study of Sherwood, and his interactions with the public, long before Sherwood became a screenwriter of anti-Nazi films, such as in *Escape in the Desert* (1945), and before he became the Overseas Director of the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1943.[28] By starting his study before Sherwood's successes, Winkler could emphasize his subject as an everyman. Indeed, Winkler understood Sherwood's approaches to propaganda to be representative of how propaganda imparted certain ideas to average members of the audience. Through Sherwood, Winkler discussed how average citizens interacted with propaganda as a source of culture and how that interaction changed public attitudes towards the war (evidenced by the plots of various plays and films he wrote before and throughout the war). Winkler also made use of his subject to criticize the post-war orthodox attitudes of the previous decades, through references to the unflattering extremes Sherwood introduced to his plots under the spell of orthodox determinism.[29]

Sherwood's films were exemplary, in many ways, of contemporary propaganda methods, but Winkler also placed them in the wider context of a vastly expanded propaganda industry. In particular, Winkler focused on the support offered to the American film industry by President Roosevelt shortly after Pearl Harbor. In a public address, Roosevelt encouraged the citizenry to engage with films as a source of both entertainment and information, capable of providing a clear understanding to the complexity of war, especially for those less inclined to read newspapers.[30] While they were only available to the general public later, soldiers watched the infamous *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) documentary series in training camps. These films reminded combatants of their role as guardians for ordinary Americans and of their way of life. The imagery and social associations evoked by the documentary series, Winkler asserted, were the most important facet of the propaganda effort. He cited the work of other social historians throughout his study, including Bill Maudlin, a former editorial cartoonist during WWII, and

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[27] Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 4-6.
[28] Cedric Larson, "The Domestic Motion Picture Work of the Office of War Information," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1948): 435.
[29] Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 13-19.
[30] *Ibid.,* 57

Ernie Pyle, a journalist who had emphasized the lived experiences of ordinary soldiers during combat. The inclusion of Maudlin's and Pyle's research over the writing of other film historians highlighted Winkler's stress on a cultural reading of WWII propaganda films and worked to strengthen his argument that images of home, not ambiguous political subjects, were the most crucial aspects of the war propaganda.[31]

True to his study of the audience and their perception of the American way of life, Winkler crossed racial divides in the examination of his subjects. In a break from much of the historical scholarship that preceded him, Winkler devoted space among his pages for discussions of the ubiquitous xenophobic and racial stereotypes in the propaganda films of WWII. Winkler wrote that the use of "guttural accents" and canned phrases created two-dimensional images of the Axis military members and political elite.[32] Written a decade after the Civil Rights movement and in the wake of the Vietnam War, Winkler's *The Politics of Propaganda* was heavily influenced by the social and political changes of his own time. Winkler also regularly struck an apologetic note, however, in referencing the significance of propagandists' efforts to protect democracy. As a result, his writing described the efforts of American producers of propaganda as occasionally misstepping into a sense of superiority, "an unintended if perhaps unavoidable consequence of war."[33]

Winkler was never so generous to Nazi propagandists in his book, but other social historians of the 1970s found cultural causes for the stylization of German WWII era propaganda. Jay W. Baird, perhaps the most notable historian of German film propaganda, focused on the value of myth as the fundamental facet of German propaganda production. "Myth was at the core of National Socialism, but heretofore underplayed in studies on the propaganda of the movement," Baird claimed.[34] He believed that the work of many early film historians could only aid as surveys or introductory works on the topic of propaganda films due to their determinist approaches. Instead, Baird merged his argument for Hitler's rise to power with historical revisionist thinking by identifying Hitler's command of German propaganda as an opportunist manipulation of German traditions and cultural biases. Baird believed that Hitler attempted to use propaganda to effectively command the German people by blending national cultural motifs with National Socialist ideology. More than any other propagandist of the twentieth century, Baird argued, Hitler was able to make domineering use of propaganda through the synthesis of symbolism and traditional German mythology.

Indeed, Baird's historical scholarship regarded film as the most effective form of propaganda. Likewise, social historians such as Baird argued that the power of film propaganda was multiplied by the mass of public consumers and their ability to disseminate and promote the nationalist agenda. The earliest National Socialist documentaries and feature films could gain public support, and Hitler through them, because they contrasted Jewish identity with the cultural ideal of *Volksgemeinschaft* (Germanic folk community). To make this point, Baird

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[31] Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 156-157.
[32] *Ibid.,* 59.
[33] *Ibid.,* 157.
[34] Jay W. Baird, *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda, 1939-1945*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1974), 4.

cites *The Eternal Jew*, in which the film emphasizes the Jewish involvement in trade as "the antithesis of the cherished values and ideals of the German cultural tradition."[35] Members of a Polish ghetto community were shown carrying goods as a narrator speaks over the footage, describing the Jewish population as removed from the rural community and unwilling to participate in combat, but quick to profit from the war effort only an hour after Germany took Poland. Through vivid and manipulative narration and imagery, the film depicted Jews as inhuman and separate from the German nation.[36]

In addition to anti-Semitism, Baird argued that feature-length propaganda films were particularly effective and help to explain why German forces fought without surrender to their utter destruction. "The apotheosis of the Nazis' glorification of sacrificial death came with the wartime feature films," Baird wrote, referencing films such as *Wunschkonzert* (1940). The hero of the film plays Bach from a church organ to encourage his comrades even as he is aware that it will lead bombers to his location.[37] The power of the film's message was through the amalgamation of music, picture (such as the aforementioned scene of the hero's concentrated back protracted over the organ while the church burns around him), and familiar German cultural motifs. *Wunschkonzert*'s title was taken from the popular German Sunday morning radio concert feature, "Wunschkonzert für die Wehrmacht," and the film made use of much of the same music requested on the station.[38] Baird's work on *Wunschkonzert* and his research into German cultural significance within Nazi propaganda may have been beyond the scope of many of his fellow cultural historians in the 1960s, but he also returned to some of the favorite films of the previous schools of thought.

Like Manvell and Fraenkel before him, Baird attempted to decipher the peculiar film, *Kolberg*. He spent less attention on the extravagant cost of the film's production, contesting that funds allocated to *Kolberg* were more indicative of the Nazi Party's determination to mythologize Hitler as a national cultural icon. In contrast to Manvell and Fraenkel, Baird claimed that the production's extravagance spoke clearly to the Nazi's weaponization of national identity more than to the personal sentiments of any one person involved in its creation.[39] Baird would return to *Kolberg*, in a later article, in which he argued that the film's power as propaganda was predicated on its ability to conjure up memories of the historic defense of the city of Kołoberg. Through the amalgamation of heroic memory, traditional cultural motifs, and nationalistic language, the film was able to defend the Party's demand for total war. Nazi propaganda, *Kolberg* among them, would go down in history as some of the most successful, because "Goebbels and his film artists and technicians operated on the principle that the best propaganda neither initiates new ideas nor belabors unnatural political and cultural themes."[40] By reviving the familiar, the social historians argued, the film propagandists were able to draw up wide public support for their aggressive war agendas.

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[35] Baird, *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda,* 6.
[36] Fritz Hippler, *The Eternal Jew*, Documentary, The National Socialist Party, 1940. https://archive.org/details/DEREWIGEJUDE1940TheEternalJewENGSUBS.
[37] Baird, *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda*, 9.
[38] *Ibid*., 8-9.
[39] *Ibid,*, 9.
[40] Jay W. Baird, "Nazi Film Propaganda and the Soviet Union," *Film and History* 11, no. 2 (May 1981): 34–40.

Postmodernism: Critical Readings and Missing Narratives

While the work of social historians in the 1970s did indicate that propaganda films altered public perception in the war and thus resulted in behavioral and attitude changes, the motivations and intentions of filmmakers and producers once again become the focus of historians in the 1990s. However, unique to their school of thought, the postmodern historians questioned assumptions about knowledge and truth in their source materials. In his survey of recent historiography, Georg G. Iggers described historians of the postmodern period as "always on the outlook for forgery and falsification and thus operat[ing] with a notion of truth, however complex and incomplete the road may [have been]."[41] Through scriptwriting, the controlled use of the camera's lens, and editing, film presented challenges to historical accuracy. Historians questioned both what was captured on film and its validity in addition to what was not, and why propagandists made these choices. Now fifty years after the end of the war, historians across the globe felt the need to reexamine sources from the WWII period. The newfound skepticism of the postmodern historians added a different level of complexity to the study of WWII propaganda films than had been investigated by historians in the past.

Doubt seems to be the impetus for much of the work of the postmodern historians. Fresh from President Nixon's near impeachment, many historical scholars maintained an attitude of aggressive skepticism. Postmodernists questioned the validity of all histories, including those of noble WWII-era governments and their interactions with the public. Sources seemed fraught with mischievous enigmas; written sources were marred by intentional and unintentional bias, and images were capable of being manipulated or misrepresented. Many postmodern intellectuals debated if any sort of understanding of the past was ever possible.

Other postmodernists remained somewhat more optimistic, such as George H. Roeder Jr., a liberal arts historian of The School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Roeder encouraged students of history to root out biases though an examination of historians behind the research. "Context helps determine the meaning of all images," reminded Roeder, in the introduction to his book, *The Censored War*.[42] Through his discussions of the economic benefits of American involvement in WWII, Roeder challenged the more orthodox readings of American propaganda films, which were hinged upon the ideals of benevolent democracy. After combat ceased in 1945, the United States was comfortably couched in global economic superiority as the world's richest nation, and Roeder suggested that the use of American propaganda films was partially responsible. A post-war American memory of a just confrontation against horrific enemies justified the gains. The span of the war had also been just long enough to cure an economic depression, but not so long as to incur massive public dissatisfaction. Rather than a convenient coincidence, Roeder argued that propaganda during the war had been carefully utilized to maintain conditions and to terminate with these results.[43] A critical reading of the

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[41] Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 98.
[42] George H. Roeder Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.
[43] Roeder Jr., *The Censored War,* 4.

films that made use of gender and racial empowerment, he argued, indicated less about social progress and suggested the fleeting nature of social gains in a controlled propagandistic context.

While previous 1970s-era social historians had fondly written on the roles of women in WWII propaganda films, Roeder railed against the impressions as anachronistic representations of feminism. "Viewers [...] encountered frequent reminders that new opportunities were only for the duration of the war," Roeder argued. For example, patches were sewn into the uniforms of female workers, delineating them from the male colleagues, as temporary staff in what was still a male-dominated economic-social sphere.[44] Posters, advertisements, and short cartoons that encouraged women to participate in the war effort often did so by juxtaposing the work women could do to domestic tasks. Audiences were to understand that the home was a woman's natural environment and the space that she would otherwise occupy during times of peace. The movement of women from the domestic sphere to the public in mass media was never intended to communicate a promise of gender equality. Similarly, Roeder's criticism of the supposed opportunities for social mobility promised by WWII propaganda films extended to Americans disenfranchised based upon their race.

The social historians of the 1970s had sought intimations in the WWII propaganda filmography that reflected the progressive attitudes of the Civil Rights Movement, but the postmodern historians of the 1990s argued that black Americans received even less lasting empowerment than women. The roles made available to black Americans in propaganda films of WWII had less to do with social equality, and more to do with fueling the cost of war across the Atlantic. Away from the war front, images of black employees working side-by-side with white Americans were available for consumption, while images of other forms of social intermingling across racial divides were censored.[45] This demarcation suggested to postmodern historians that these working opportunities were simply another cog in the war machine and would only survive their immediate necessity. "The racial barriers became burdensome to leaders in the private spheres trying to satisfy wartime needs," Roeder explains, but the inclusion of black labor in the war effort was a far cry from any public demand for enforceable legal equality.[46]

It is arguable that film did have some power to induce a public call to action, and Roeder took pains to demonstrate the ways that the propaganda industry circumvented the agency it gave to black characters. To demonstrate this argument, Roeder pulled from the published statements of the OWI, which encouraged filmmakers to include black American soldiers in crowd scenes or the "occasional [...] colored officer."[47] The inclusions of these characters was intended to promote wartime unity and the conscription of black Americans to the war effort, but the images that were included were strictly controlled. Roeder cited the work of the film historian Alan Woll, who studied the unique cinematography in WWII propaganda films that included black characters. In pictures such as *Thousands Cheer* and *Ziegfeld Follies*, filmmakers organized the plot and shot scenes in a manner that would allow a theater to easily remove the scenes with black characters if they chose to, without disrupting the story, and it

[44] Roeder Jr., *The Censored War, 72.*
[45] *Ibid.,* 73-74.
[46] *Ibid.,* 45.
[47] *Ibid.*

appeared this was often the case when these films were presented in southern movie theaters.[48] Images that showed black people in authority positions were also minimalized, and genuine documentary evidence of racial conflict from the war front was censored back in the States.[49] The ability to unify the public through black characters was not central to propaganda films, according to a postmodern reading of the data.

Further dismantling the national pride myth of propaganda, as had been extolled by the post-war orthodox historians, Roeder was heavily critical of war industry films. He argued that these films were less about national sentiment and more about dismantling collective identities. He referenced *Men of Fire* (1944), which contrasted difficult combat conditions to the carefree life of a sales clerk. Films such as these "sought to inspire feelings of guilt."[50] The Department of Treasury created documentaries that contained images of dead or maimed soldiers from the war front for factories that were experiencing labor problems. The films were played during staff coffee breaks to prevent unionization and increase production. These same films were then released to the public for consumption in the summer of 1945, a choice that Roeder explained was designed to circumvent economic slowing in the anticipated surrender of Germany. Propaganda films served not only to motivate the public for 'good or evil,' depending on one's allegiance, as they had often been interpreted in the past. Instead, the postmodern reading of WWII propaganda films indicated that greed and social manipulation were clear factors in film production within the United States.

On a divergent note from the readings of Allied propaganda, some postmodernists rejected the 1970s-era social historians' claims that Axis propaganda could represent filmmakers' inherent needs for artistic outlets. David Culbert, the historian of Nazi propaganda, argued that previous readings of propaganda, like those of the post-war orthodox historians, had oversimplified creators' intentions and had focused their scholarship restrictively to the war effort. In the chapter on the German film, *Kolberg*, that Culbert published in *World War II, Film and History* (1996), he criticized Baird's interpretation of the film as too naïve. Culbert believed Goebbels's long and constant contact with the film's production was evidence of more than an unassuming validation of heroic and sacrificial death.[51] Instead, a postmodern interpretation of the film, according to Culbert, signified the practical and political machinations of Goebbels. Baird's misstep was that he failed to consider the historical context around which *Kolberg* was made, for his cultural reading of the data neglected to mention the fact that the city of Kołoberg had already been decimated and was beyond saving by the time the film was released to the public. Culbert claimed that the reasoning for this was hidden in Goebbels's diary.

Culbert argued that the psychological importance of the city holding out had more to do with Goebbels's artistic sensibility. The propaganda he had created was greater than the reality. Culbert insisted the film was held back from release after production because Goebbels

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[48] Roeder Jr., *The Censored War,* 56.
[49] *Ibid.,* 45.
[50] *Ibid., 53.*
[51] David Culbert, "*Kolberg* (Germany, 1945): The Goebbels Diaries and Poland's Kołobrzeg Today," in *World War II, Film, and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68.

feared the soon-to-come historical surrender would devalue his production by failing to match up to his creation. Rather than being a tool of national fervor and troop support, "Goebbels was more concerned that the dramaturgy of *Kolberg* be right than it find civilian release in time to make sense as a propaganda vehicle."[52] In this instance, personal interests were thrust ahead of national political objectives, indicating that what had long been interpreted as film propaganda by historians may instead have been better interpreted as a personal history of Goebbels himself. Anomalies like *Kolberg* were as tempting to the postmodernists as they were to their predecessors, but the historians of the 1990s were some of the first to question why certain gaps existed in propaganda scholarship. Contrary to the popular expectations, documentary evidence of the conditions in Holocaust internment camps had remained largely undiscussed by film historians before the 1990s. The reason for this, according to Roeder, was that very few of these films were made available to American audiences after some of the first internment camps were liberated. What could have been some of the most powerful imagery to come out of the war, especially within the scope of the polarized age of propaganda, was largely censored from the screen. Instead, political powers determined that the reality of cruelty and horror would only alienate the public from continuing to attend war-time film showings.[53] Producers of WWII propaganda films considered it more valuable for viewers to consume images of the war as entertainment, and that social control was more important to filmmakers than truth. Roeder argued that previous historians had long ignored this aspect in the historical film record and had largely neglected to mention the lack of these films during the WWII era. By contrast, postmodern historians adopted less constrained and definitive approaches, and were thus more inclined to study the significance of the gaps and silences in the film propaganda data pool.

Recent Analysis: Pop Culture and Memory

Historians of the 21st century continued to question the validity of the historical record as had the postmodernists before them. With an emphasis on popular culture and memory, contemporary historians have focused on the thematic motifs and shared cultural elements that were a familiar part of the film consumption in the 1940s. Michael S. Shull and Dr. David Wilt, both of the Film Studies department at George Washington University, published an examination of animated WWII propaganda films in 2004. They argued that their work recognized a significant subsection of WWII propaganda that had been overlooked by social historians of the previous generations.[54] Despite limited budgets and production time constraints, many of these short features, which were a standard part of most theater entertainment from the 1930s to the 1960s, have provided concentrated nuggets of the era's atmosphere. While the animated shorts that typified the opening entertainment of feature films before and during WWII were typically designed for adolescent viewers, these cartoons often contained visual and verbal cues that were specifically meant to communicate to the accompanying adult audience.

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[52] Culbert, "*Kolbert*," 75.
[53] Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War*, 127.
[54] Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt, *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*, 2nd ed., (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 3.

Seeking to communicate largely to American audiences (as the U.S. produced the greatest amount of WWII animation by far), characters like Walt Disney's Donald Duck allowed audiences to escape wartime woes with humor, which ultimately served to build up a culture of confidence for the Allied forces. The feature productions of the majority of WWII propaganda films were created under the watchful gaze of the OWI, but the animated shorts that preceded these films had remarkably more freedom. Despite the opportunity to represent divergent attitudes, these shorts typically continued to encourage the home front to participate in the war effort.

In the shorts *Out of the Frying Pan Into the Firing Line* (1942), homemakers were encouraged to save their used cooking grease to construct explosives. In *Barney Bear's Victory Garden* (1942), the central character crafts a caricature of Hitler's face in his backyard to bring in American bombers as assistants to his plowing efforts. A direct hit loosens the soil enough to begin planting. Cartoonists after the attack on Pearl Harbor gleefully jumped on the opportunity to criminalize the Japanese through racist depictions so derogatory that they offended reviewers of the OWI.[55] These shorts represented mid-war attitudes of the American public, already incensed by years of polarized propaganda, on race. While the American social landscape has never been free of racism, these derogatory racial depictions encouraged ignorant fears and brought distrust of east Asian ethnic descendants to the forefront of public consciousness.[56] Such historical examples supported Shull's and Wilt's argument that WWII animated films were significant to the study of popular culture of the 1930s-1940s.[57] The study of propaganda in its many forms, from animated shorts to documentaries, has been increasingly interpreted as a valuable source of historical media and mass communication scholarship over the last twenty years.

Ralph Donald, Chair of the Mass Communications Department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, has agreed that the study of American propaganda films and popular culture are heavily intertwined. In his recent publication of the history of American propaganda films, *Hollywood Enlists* (2017), Donald claimed that WWII represented a significant age of American cultural imperialism. The ubiquity of Hollywood entertainment had provided Americans with an attitude of themselves as the norm. In contrast, Donald argued that scholars of media studies have associated propaganda studies for far too long with manipulation tactics and the corruption of totalitarian regimes. By emphasizing propaganda as a vehicle of willful deceit and political exploitation, the western consciousness of the term is typically associated with foreign powers and divorced from domestic inquiry. Donald suggests instead that the world is "inundated with a flood of intentional and unintentional messages about American culture, thought, and values in the media products that America exports." This reframing of what activities and media fit within the umbrella of propaganda has fostered new studies into the conquest of popular culture as ideological colonization.[58] Donald argued that more modern

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[55] Schull and Wilt, *Doing Their Bit,* 41-43.
[56] Christopher Maiytt, "Deep Imprints: The Influence of Film and Television Toward Asian Immigrants." Presented at *Citizenship and Sociopathy in Film, Television, and New Media* conference, 2018.
[57] Shull and Wilt, *Doing Their Bit*, 9-10.
[58] Ralph Donald, *Hollywood Enlists! Propaganda Films of WWII*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), ix-x.

interpretations of propaganda, including subversive and unintentional propaganda, provide new vehicles for the scholarly interpretation of WWII films.

While political and religious propaganda has existed for centuries, the birth of the motion picture industry in the late 19th century set the stage for a world poised to use propaganda in new ways by the 20th. Moreover, while propaganda films were produced during WWI and the interim-period, WWII has long been treated as propaganda films' adolescence. Despite this, Donald argues that these films were not so immature and blunt as historians have treated them in the past. To emphasize his point, Donald argued that WWII propagandists used a complicated technique, called cueing, to stimulate the emotional attitudes of viewers subtly. By utilizing carefully chosen rhetoric, screenwriters could call up sentiments of rage or grief already ingrained in the audience's cultural psyche. The phrase that was perhaps the most common of all the cueing techniques used during WWII was "Remember Pearl Harbor." The phrasing had been recycled from other American conflicts in the past, especially instances in which Americans had a developed a sense of righteous vengeance, such as "Remember the Alamo" or "Remember the Maine." Donald uses *The Fighting Seabees* (1944) to illustrate his argument, in which none of the characters directly states, "Remember Pearl Harbor," but the words are part of the opening musical accompaniment. The portion of the instrumental score in which these words were said is reprised through several dramatic scenes in the film.[59]

Paul Cohen, a scholar of historical thought and American historiography, noticed something similar in his reading of Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), which blurred the lines between high art, popular culture, and propaganda. According to Cohen, propagandists of WWII were both highly skilled in the production of their films, but also in the power of constructing historical memory. In *History and Popular Memory* (2014), Cohen references some bold adaptations Olivier made to his version of the film. While simultaneously drawing on elements from the historical record and Shakespeare's highly fictitious account of the same events, Olivier's version depicts Henry V as a kinder, more generous conqueror of France than he was in life or had been portrayed in the theater. The reason for the adjustments to the character, according to Cohen, was because at the time of its release France was again occupied, but in this case by Nazi Germany. These subtle changes guided the audience into celebrating their past as a powerful empire without evoking direct connections to the Third Reich.[60] Contrary to previous readings by historians of the 20th century, which typically described propaganda films as glaringly biased and crude, contemporary historians have argued that filmmakers in propaganda's coming of age were already educated in the power of subtle suggestion.

The study of WWII propaganda films is still ongoing, and no historian covered in this essay can claim to be the authoritative voice on how these films should be interpreted. While it is commonsensical to anticipate social and political events would sway the attitudes of the public, this historiographical study confirms that these events also influence the scholarly community's ways of studying the past. History is not static, and the past is not set in stone.

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[59] Donald, *Hollywood Enlists!*, 49-50.
[60] Paul A. Cohen, *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 201-202.

Interpreters of the past are constantly renegotiating their relationship with memory and the passage of time. By developing an understanding of how the academic community understands and reinterprets the past, students of history can seek out new theories and perspectives to understand WWII propaganda films without retracing the steps of their predecessors. It may not be what Sidney B. Fay had in mind when he alluded to a future of propaganda studies that would be "more just." Had he used the term as a synonym for "accurate," he may have been disappointed to see the results. Had he meant "fair," then perhaps a myriad of interpretations is as close as the world will ever get.

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